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OR,

The Gladiators of Jack's Delight.

A Story of the Idaho Mines.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "CENTRAL PACIFIC PAUL," "WILD
WEST WALT," "YANK YELLOWBIRD,"
"BORDER BULLET," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE "REDS" DEMAND THE SPOILS.

THERE were signs of coming trouble at the mining town of Jack's Delight, Idaho. Not that trouble would be any thing new there, for the place had some hard characters, but what had gone before had been the outbreak of one or two persons, and the new departure involved a hundred men.

Jack's Delight had its hostile factions, and the worst of all had met in a formal manner and passed by a unanimous vote the following ominous preamble and resolutions:

"Whereas, the august city of Jack's Delight is now a large and prosperous burg, carrying on its back a mayor and full set of officers; and

"HERE IS MY WEAPON!" GARRY KEAN RETORTED. "KEEP BACK, OR I WILL THROW THIS TORCH INTO THE KEG OF POWDER!"

"Whereas, a certain class of citizens have heretofore had exclusive control in all way, shape and manner, thereby monopolizing all public offices, and the benefits accruing therefrom, and ruling the people to the detriment of the gentlemen in this place assembled:

"Resolved, that we, the people, now request and demand that the party in power do stand aside for the space of one year, yield their claim to the use of the whole earth, and give somebody else a show; and,

"Resolved, that if our just and proper request is not granted, we will make Rome howl, and place a candidate of our own choosing in the mayor's chair, even though we fight our way there with revolver and knife; and,

"Resolved, that Nathan Bradley, Thad Johnson and August Pahckakoff be appointed a committee to wait upon Judge Abram Brackett to make known our demands."

There the document ended, though enough resolutions were suggested to have used up all the stationery at Jack's Delight, had they been adopted. They were only declined because they were practically repetitions of what had already been put on paper.

A year before Jack's Delight had left its swaddling garments, emerged from a state where every man was a law to himself, and elected a judge, a mayor and divers other officers. The term of the former was fixed at three years, while that of the mayor and his subordinates was limited to one year.

The place had a by-far-too-large population of roughs, but the better class of citizens outnumbered them, voted together and elected as mayor a man who received not one vote from the rougher part of the voters. The latter received no recognition whatever, and during the ensuing eleven months they meditated on their alleged wrongs, studied on the future and grew angry apace.

Judge Brackett they could not disturb in his official position, as his term was not half completed, but they were resolved to supplant Mayor Elijah Nicholson with one of their own clique. By common consent the two factions had become known as the Blacks and the Reds. The first class was composed of good citizens, many of whom wore garments of fair quality, and their name arose from the fact that the judge and the mayor always dressed in black. On the other hand, the rougher element ultimately wore red shirts to a man, thereby making their name equally appropriate.

When the Reds passed the foregoing resolutions it was not empty campaign talk. They were ominously in earnest. They had determined that Nathan Bradley, their leader, should be the next mayor; their numbers did not admit of their electing him by the mere force of votes; so they were determined that the Blacks should refrain from putting a candidate in the field, give the minority the offices for a year, and let them run things to their hearts' content; or to inaugurate a state of affairs which should be the French Revolution over again, as far as disregard of law and good citizenship was concerned.

The meeting did not adjourn, but remained in session while the committee went to call upon Judge Brackett and request his co-operation.

Nathan Bradley, who headed the committee, and was the Reds' candidate for mayor, was a fit leader of his party. He had a degree of education; could assume the manners of a gentleman; was possessed of a measure of good looks; and his thirty years' experience with the world had made him shrewd, cool, and, in a certain way, capable. No more could be said in his favor. He was thoroughly unscrupulous, and was with congenial spirits when among the Reds.

Thad Johnson had no redeeming trait. He was big, burly, ignorant, cunning and lawless—an undesirable man to have in any community.

August Pahckakoff was a man of foreign nationality who, even since his birth, had been in a state of rebellion against all things and all men. Too lazy to work, he hated those who did, whether they had a million dollars, or only one hundred dollars back of them. He had been an agitator in the Old World until it became too hot for him; he had aired his ideas freely in Chicago until compelled to move on; and, finally, in the broad arena of the Far West, he was tearing around at a remarkable rate, advocating the cause of labor against capital, but never working, himself. There was only one good thing to be said about him—his knowledge of the English language was so limited that he could with difficulty be understood, and, consequently, was less an annoyance to honest men, whether they were rich or poor.

These three men marched toward Judge Brackett's house.

"I'll bet we git left," observed Johnson.

"Get left! Why so?" Bradley asked.

"You know what a stubborn galoot the judge is."

"And you know we mean business."

"I don't forgit the judge's grit."

"Grit can be got away with."

"You see how Brackett will talk!"

"I can bend him like a green twig. You don't know my power. Our resolutions were all right, and capable of scaring a common man—"

"Which the judge ain't."

"Which he is not," calmly agreed Bradley.

"All the same, I shall make him meek enough. I shall, if necessary, tackle him on personal grounds."

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"You folks here don't know much about Abram Brackett. You see him in his official position, dealing out decrees without mercy, and with a bulldog will that has made you fellows nickname him 'The Iron Judge'; you see him with a beautiful wife and a blind daughter; but what more do you know about the family?"

"I know Garry Kean is sweet on the blind gal."

"Drop Garry Kean!" exclaimed Bradley, with manifest irritation. "He is a strolling actor who would be in prison if he had his rights; a dandy, who has an undue measure of popularity because he played Marc Antony here like a routing novice, and got into a quarrel which, without any good reason, gave him the sobriquet of 'The Man with Backbone.'"

Johnson winked sagely.

"You don't like him, Brad."

"I do not, and you know it!"

Mr. Bradley spoke sharply, emphasizing his confession.

"Wal, what about the Iron Judge? You say we don't know him here."

"Right! you don't. I do! I tell you, Thad, there is a way to the Iron Judge's heart, and it is through his blind daughter, Alice. The shadows of the past fall upon him and the girl, and I know all about it."

"What's the secret?" Thad asked, eagerly.

Bradley smiled craftily.

"Whatever it is, I shall use it to down Brackett."

The speaker knew his business well. The office of mayor was not the only point to which his ambition pointed. While the Reds of Jack's Delight followed his lead they were likely to find him loyal, but his first interest was all for Nathan Bradley, and he was playing for a double stake.

Such being the case, he had no notion of sharing his secret with Thad Johnson.

The trio soon reached Judge Brackett's house. Young as Jack's Delight was, it already had some very substantial private residences, among these being the houses of the judge, Colonel Yoke Norman, and of Mayor Elijah Nicholson. The building before which the committee paused would have done credit to many a village far older and more famous.

They ascended the steps; they rung the bell; an old woman answered the summons; and in a short time they were in the presence of the owner of the house.

Abram Brackett was the leading man of Jack's Delight. Honors might rest markedly upon Colonel Norman and Elijah Nicholson, but in many ways the judge utterly eclipsed them.

He was forty-two years old. He looked his age in certain ways, but his thick black hair was still without gray threads. He was a trifle taller and heavier than the average of men, and strongly formed. He dressed well, and made a notable figure wherever he went. For this his face was chiefly responsible. It was a face of power. He was abundantly gifted with manly good looks, but when the observer's gaze was attracted, as it was sure to be, he would not think of that.

He would see the broad, full, keen and intelligent face; the square, firm jaws; the resolute mouth; the large, dark, expressive eyes; and the high, full forehead; and the impression would grow upon him that Abram Brackett was a man of wonderful courage, firmness and capability.

"The Iron Judge," they called him at Jack's Delight. All gave him credit with being a severe servant of justice, and his enemies declared that he was without mercy or human feeling; but his friends, noticing his tender care for his blind daughter, averred that under his iron exterior lay a kind heart.

Such was the man upon whom the committee had called.

He received them with cold courtesy, and from the way he studied their faces with his large, dark eyes, it was apparent at the first that he did not expect any good to come of the visit.

Nathan Bradley began diplomatically. He stated that he and his friends desired the judge's co-operation in a matter of great importance. He reminded Brackett that at the previous election of a mayor there had been two parties. One had won, and the offices of the "city" had been at their disposal during the past year. The defeated party had received nothing; they felt that they ought now to have their turn; and they "respectfully" asked Judge Brackett to lend his aid to accomplish their desires.

Could they count upon him?

The ice was broken, and the ambassadors eagerly studied the countenance of their host. They might as well have studied the Sphinx; his iron face told nothing.

"If you wish to elect a certain man" he answered, calmly, "why don't you place him in nomination, and vote for him?"

"It would do no good," Bradley answered.

"Why so?"

"He would be defeated. The Blacks will go solidly for their candidate, unless prevailed up-

on to refrain from putting up a man, and they outnumber the Reds."

"Can you not draw votes from them?"

"The question seems superfluous, judge. You must be aware how tight party lines are drawn here; the Reds have nothing to hope for from the Blacks, unless an influential man like you will take up the game and prevent the nomination of a second candidate in opposition to us."

"Elections are rare where there is but one candidate."

"We will not object to opposition, if you will influence fifty men to come over to us."

"Well, Mr. Bradley, I cannot do that. I do not think one in my position should be a wire-puller. A judge should attend to his duties, and favor no one particular faction; a man who sits on the bench of justice, East or West, has no business to dabble in politics. He should be neutral."

The ambassadors began to be angry, and Thad would have vented his wrath had not Bradley given him a stern look. The man had promised to let his leader conduct affairs, and Bradley intended to do so.

"Judge," he returned, "if you will help us, we will go for you to a man when your term as judge expires."

Abram Brackett frowned.

"I decline to make any bargain!" he answered, coldly.

"Does our friendship go for nothing?"

"I do not say anything against you, but when my successor is appointed, two years hence, I shall leave the whole matter to the voters of Jack's Delight. I will not sell my manhood to any man; I give, and require, no pledges. The election of two years hence must be decided by honest voting; so must the one so close upon us, for all I shall do!"

He spoke firmly, inexorably, if not harshly. That tone had been heard before; it had been heard when, from the bench, he sternly pronounced sentence upon some lawless Red. The Iron Judge was thoroughly himself.

Chagrin and anger were plainly depicted in Nathan Bradley's face, but he forced himself to remain temperate in word and manner.

"You will disappoint many of our fellow-citizens, judge. Read how our honest, eager men have resolved in meeting?"

He passed over the set of Resolutions.

"This will not influence me," remarked the judge, quietly, "but if it will oblige you, I will read it."

"Pray do so!"

The Iron Judge read. While he was occupied the trio looked at him still more eagerly, but again his face was as stoical as that of an Indian. When he was through he raised his eyes and imperturbably asked:

"Do you intend to make this document public?"

"Yes."

"Then you will never name the Mayor of Jack's Delight!"

CHAPTER II.

THE IRON ON THE ANVIL.

BRADLEY'S face flushed with anger.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Have the terms of this paper been carefully considered?"

"Yes."

"According to this you 'demand' that your candidate be given a clear field?"

"Exactly."

"And say that if your demand is not complied with, you will place your man in the mayor's chair with revolver and knife, if need be."

"That's it, sir."

"I could not find terms too severe to express my opinion of the framer of this intemperate article, so I will not try. But, Mr. Bradley, I should suppose a man of your education, and one with your worldly experience, would know better. Let me advise you to burn this paper, and replace it with a calm, respectful petition. Leave out all incendiary talk about revolvers and knives, and request, not demand, what you desire."

"We've heard you patiently, judge, but you go away from the mark. We tried the peaceful dodge a year ago. We voted for our men. We might as well have not voted at all. We lost; our votes went for nothing; and, instead of getting an occasional favor from Mayor Nicholson, we have been scorned, slighted, ignored and arrested ever since. We are done with child's play!"

"Suppose you base your claim on knives and revolvers instead of votes—will you not still be in the minority?"

"No, by Judas!" interrupted Thad Johnson, fiercely. "One Red can whip a dozen Blacks, and we'll clean 'em out so slick that, after 'lection, all there will be necessary ter do will be ter count our votes an' bury their buddies!"

"Bear in mind that I am a judge!"

"What of it?"

"You have confessed a premeditation to resort to deeds of bloodshed."

"We'll do it, too!"

"And get in the grasp of the law," added the Iron Judge, with cold severity.

"Wait," directed Bradley; "it is possible that we may yet arrive at an understanding. I desire to speak with you alone."

"It is not necessary!" declared Brackett.

"It is very necessary."

A glance at Thad Johnson was enough to make that individual rise. The third ambassador protested as soon as he understood the idea, but his vehement words were not comprehensible to any one, and Thad took him away, half by force. Bradley and the Iron Judge were left together. The latter looked sterner than ever; he anticipated a dishonorable attempt to influence—perhaps to bribe him—and felt that he was acting very leniently to endure the man's presence.

"This is a matter between you and me," observed Bradley, suddenly assuming a very bland manner.

"Proceed, sir," was the icy reply.

"I want to be your friend."

"Then don't lead the roughs of Jack's Delight on in their would-be lawless career."

"Pardon me; it will not come to that. There will be no outbreak. I shall be elected mayor, but it will be by peaceable means, and, once I am in office, you shall see that the change has not been for the worse. Even if the votes of a rough element elect me, I shall administer the law with strict honor and justice."

"Come to the point!" directed the judge, impatiently.

"I will, and I want to make this a personal matter. I wish to be your friend—"

"Words, empty words!"

"Don't force me to be too abrupt," urged Bradley, with an actual exhibition of embarrassment.

"I ask you to come to the point."

"I will do so!" was the prompt reply, and there was an unpleasant ring to the speaker's voice. "Judge, you and I ought to hang together. You can help me; I can injure you, if I see fit. What if I were to tell abroad in Jack's Delight the old episode of the valley house of Saint Ledair?"

The words were quickly, sharply spoken, and Bradley's gaze dwelt watchfully on his companion's face. He looked to see a change—he saw a change. Abram Brackett started abruptly and the full color swiftly deserted his fine face. It went, and left behind a pallor no man had before seen there since the Iron Judge came to the mining-town. Iron grows weak under certain circumstances, and the firm justice of Jack's Delight clearly had his vulnerable point.

He did not speak, but sat staring at Nathan Bradley in silence, pallid, dismayed, frightened. "You might defy the specter of Saint Ledair," Nathan added, "but Alice Brackett cannot—nor can you defy it for her."

The judge reached quickly over and grasped Bradley's arm in a hold which was almost crushing.

"Utter her name again and I will kill you!" he declared, speaking in a whisper the husky intonation of which did not conceal a fixed and terrible purpose.

"Be calm, sir! Have I not said I wished to be your friend? The secret is safe with me—on conditions!"

Brackett made a quick, strong effort to recover composure. The first shock of dismay was over, and his strong will re-asserted itself.

"What nonsense do you talk! I know of no secret."

"Don't struggle on the hook: When I mentioned Saint Ledair you knew at once that a certain page in your life was open to me. You are a man too intelligent to waste time in idle denials. How about the summer day nearly a score of years ago; the hill-tramping student; the swift-running stream; the peril and the rescue; the old people, and the other person, of the valley house; the halcyon days; the trip to the village parsonage; the interposing shadow of another judge, not you—"

Abram Brackett put out one hand commandingly.

"You have said enough," he said. "Stop!"

Not even when on the bench had his voice been more imperative and firm, but it was only a caricature of firmness; it was not a desperate mask, but the habit and practice of years; the nature of the man asserting itself even in the moment when the most poignant despair was tearing at his heart.

He was no weakling, to be crushed by secrets of the past, and had this particular secret affected himself alone, he would have defied Nathan Bradley at once and inexorably. But it did more; it closely concerned one whose happiness was dearer to the Iron Judge than his own life.

"You understand me," Bradley added.

"Understand what?"

"That we can be mutually useful to each other."

"How can you be useful to me?"

"By keeping your secret."

"Because you have been prying into my private affairs, do you call it a secret?"

"I do, for no one at Jack's Delight knows of it save you and me. You would not have them

know it for anything, and you have kept very quiet."

"How have you learned so much, then?"

"That I can't state."

"Why should my private affairs interest you?"

"They never did until I wanted your help."

"From whom did you learn my past?"

"You must excuse me from telling."

"Is the person here now?"

"No."

"Does any one share your secret?"

"No."

The judge was silent, but his powerful face had an expression which would have worried Nathan Bradley had he been of less firm will, himself. Knowing no mercy, and being destitute of honor, he judged others by himself, and felt sure that Brackett was meditating how he could use his official position to crush his daring enemy. Bradley, situated as the judge was situated, would have laid a trap for his enemy and crippled his enemy's sources of mischief by getting him confined within the walls of a prison. He suspected that Brackett was considering this point, but it did not trouble him; he felt able to battle against even the Iron Judge.

"You see how easy it is for us to make terms," Nathan finally added.

"What do I get by the bargain?"

"Safety for your secret."

"And you would get the mayor's chair?"

"Yes."

Abram Brackett leaned back and gazed steadily at his companion. He had known him a good while; he knew no good of him. He knew his looks well, but desired to gaze again and see what new villainy, or meanness, was expressed in his face. The bargain proposed was an insult to the judge. He had always scorned political bargains and the bargainers. At the beginning he had heard Nathan with poorly-concealed annoyance—now, he was compelled to listen to what he revolted from.

He looked to see what new meanness Nathan had developed in the way of personal appearance, and he had more respect for the worm that crawled in the dust than for the man who dared to suggest official corruption to him.

Nathan met his gaze unwaveringly. Villain the man might be, and was, but he was no craven.

"Suppose I decline your proposal, sir?" Brackett resumed.

"I don't think you will."

"Why not?"

"You don't want the secret told."

"And you would tell it if I refused?"

"Frankly, yes."

"What if I defy you?"

"You cannot; you have no right to. The blow would fall heaviest, not upon you or your present wife, but upon Miss Alice, your afflicted daughter."

"What is to hinder my leaving Jack's Delight, and leaving my present acquaintances and the secret alike behind?"

"I am the obstacle. I may as well speak plainly. Having plunged into the stream, I am going to swim it. I cannot agree to let you leave Jack's Delight. Should you go secretly, I shall soon know of it, and shall follow you. I can tell your secret as well in some other town as here, and it will fall as heavily upon Alice there."

Brackett's nostrils dilated.

"You threaten me!" he uttered in a deep voice.

"You have compelled me to speak plainly."

"Nathan Bradley, if it were not for my daughter, I would settle with you promptly!"

"I know it, judge; but for her sake, you will avoid violence and accede to my proposal. What have I asked of you? Nothing, surely, that you need hesitate to grant. The best men in politics unite to help each other, and I deny that it is dishonorable. Now, I say to you—help me in my attempt to be mayor, and, two years hence, I will throw all my influence to have you re-elected judge."

"By the votes of the Reds?"

"Yes."

"Honorable backing."

"There was never a great end achieved without some rude, practical fellows in the ranks."

Brackett made a deprecating gesture. The idea of referring to the Reds so politely was a little more than he could silently endure.

"When do you want your answer?" he asked.

"At once, if you please; though, of course, I shall not be so severe as to insist upon it."

"Give me forty-eight hours."

"I will. Now, judge, don't get the idea that I am your enemy. There is no man in the city who is less so. If I have made what seems a hard bargain, it is because I am anxious to win. Once in the mayor's chair, I will keep the fair fame of Jack's Delight always in view—"

"No doubt!" was the grim, ironical reply.

"We will not discuss that point."

He arose, and Bradley followed his example. The latter was not reluctant to go: he had been as successful as he dared to hope, and it was prudent to leave the judge alone. He said a few words at parting in a polite way, and Brackett listened with outward patience; then the lead-

ing "Red" called to his eager followers and led them from the house.

Abram Brackett was left alone.

Not until then was any suggestion given of the overwhelming force of the blow he had received. His strong will had sustained him while Nathan was present, but now that all eyes were removed from him, he sunk into a chair and all the strength seemed to leave his physical and mental being.

"Lost!" he uttered, in a moaning way. "The blow has come at last, and may Heaven help my poor Alice!"

CHAPTER III.

GARRY KEAN TO THE BAR.

AN hour later a score of men approached the Brackett house. At first glance the party might well have been taken for a mob of "Reds" on some destructive mission, and there certainly were Reds at the rear: rough, lawless-looking fellows, whom no honest man would care to have for companions by night or day. At the front, however, were men of different character, and the scene was to be easily understood by any one who was well acquainted with Jack's Delight.

The leader of the procession was stout Ambrose White, the sheriff, and in his charge was a prisoner.

The latter was not one of the toughs of the place. On the contrary, it would have been hard to find a finer-looking man at Jack's Delight. He was young, well-formed, manly, and respectably dressed, and in any place would have attracted more than passing attention.

Plainly he was not a miner. His hands were soft and white, and his round, well-colored face had not the deep bronze common among the gold-diggers. Neither did he look like a criminal. An unprejudiced observer would have thought well of him, and marked him as an honorable man, if looks went for anything.

Prisoner though he was, he gave no signs of being the victim of hard usage, while he walked boldly in the sheriff's grasp, and held his head erect.

The party paused in front of Brackett's house, and a peremptory summons soon brought the judge to the door. He was again perfectly calm.

"Judge!" cried White, "here is Mister Garry Kean again!"

"So I see," Brackett replied, shortly.

"Under arrest."

"What new villainy has he been up to?"

"Stealing a horse!"

"Go slow, Mr. Sheriff!" calmly interrupted the man who had been called Garry Kean. "Don't bite off more than you can chew. I deny the charge."

"That's all the good it will do you!"

"Are you a judge on the bench?"

"No; but you'll see a judge on the bench soon enough."

"Why are you here, sheriff?" asked Brackett, impatiently.

"To tell you about my prisoner."

"Court is not in session. If the man is guilty, put him in jail. I can't be bothered by him."

"Ah! but there is more than horse-stealing!"

"More?"

"Yes. Put the crowd back!"

The last words were addressed to his aids, and they gave prompt obedience; the idle observers were forced back out of hearing.

"Judge," White added, "I'm sorry, but I have bad news for you. Prepare for a shock!"

Garry Kean smiled scornfully.

"Speak out!" Brackett sharply ordered.

"This man was running away with your daughter!"

The Iron Judge recoiled. The announcement had been made without any feeling, but it was a severe revelation to Abram Brackett. Once more he had been touched in his only vulnerable part; he might be a man of iron at other times, but he was terribly weak when Alice Brackett was concerned. His mind remained clear, however, and he heard Garry Kean's stern retort:

"Sheriff, you have told an infamous falsehood!"

"The proof is complete. Brackett, he was running away with your blind daughter!"

The Iron Judge moved forward and laid one hand upon White's arm. His manner was very calm, but his dark face had grown pale and his eyes glittered unpleasantly.

"Sheriff," he said, in a low, husky voice, "you must prove that charge or make me your enemy. The name of my daughter shall not be made the theme of idle talk. Prove it! You might as well try to prove that the sun has been blotted out of the heavens. How dare you associate my daughter's name with that man's? I, too, say that you speak falsely!"

His voice remained as low as ever, but it was an ominous mood; thus did the raging storms which, at times, swept over the mountain town, gather strength for desolating fury in a lull full of dangerous import.

Ambrose White was staggered; his nature was too commonplace to comprehend the emo-

tions of his superior. But Garry Kean spoke quickly:

"Sir, your instinct tells you right. This man wrongs me, and he wrongs Miss Brackett foully. Do not believe him. Your daughter, herself, will deny the statement."

"Observe how confidently he speaks of her!" cried White, growing angry. "Judge, you have been blind; the things that all the rest of Jack's Delight knew have been unseen and unsuspected by you. This man and your daughter—"

"She does not know him; she never even spoke with him!" exclaimed Brackett, sharply.

"Ask your town's-people. They will tell you that the two have walked together outside the village time and again. As for to-day—Men," turning to his followers, "did we, or did we not, arrest this play-actor wretch when Alice Brackett was in the carriage with him, leaving town?"

"We did!" a sober-faced deputy admitted.

"Brackett, you hear! I speak no ill of poor, blind Alice Brackett; I would as soon malign an angel in Heaven; but I tell you this wretch has bewitched her. He has stolen the affections of a blind girl, and was inducing her to elope when we stopped them!"

The angry sheriff had had his say, and he left two men in a mood when their faces were a striking study.

Brackett, who could face all danger, and any trouble except what menaced Alice, was dumfounded. He had known of Garry Kean; he had even had the young man before him in the court-room; but he had never dreamed that Garry and Alice knew each other. Entertaining a very poor opinion of the man, he was dismayed at the news.

Garry was, himself, far from calm, and he evidently bore the sheriff no good will; but after one menacing look at his accuser, he fixed a troubled regard upon the judge. It seemed that more weighty matters than indignation were in his mind, and that the effect of the revelation upon Brackett was what concerned him most.

Before more could be said, two other persons approached.

One was a girl who looked to be scarcely more than a child. She was of slight figure, and her face was strikingly pretty, but it was loveliness which seemed out of place among the common creatures of the world. More than once the remark had been heard that she was more angel than human. Her slender form; her delicate, mild, refined and highly-intellectual face; her quiet and gentle manner—all this was very much out of place in the rough mining-town.

Such was Alice Brackett, the judge's blind daughter.

She made a striking picture as she approached. She was dressed in blue, a color which exactly suited her complexion and light-brown hair, and as excitement had flushed her cheeks, she had never looked prettier.

By her side walked another woman. Her name was Electa Parsons; she was employed at the Brackett house, and was known as a sort of watch-dog who was prepared to do and die, if need be, for Alice. Electa was not handsome. She had passed her fortieth year, and the flight of time had made its mark. She was tall, bony, angular and masculine. She looked severe, but was blessed with a good disposition. She aspired to be considered a "practical" woman, but was far from it; she cultivated a masculine way of speaking, but always failed to be as harsh as she desired.

These two persons came to a halt near the door. Up to that time Alice had moved very freely, but uncertainty now became apparent; the lack of sight had rarely been more of a misfortune.

"Miss Alice," announced Electa, in her most masculine voice, "there is men here. There is your father, Judge Abram Brackett; there is Mr. Garry Kean; there is Sheriff Ambrose White; there is other men, hack out o' hearin'. There is great turnin's out, an' a hullabaloo which don't seem called for!"

And the speaker looked severely at the sheriff.

"Father!"

Alice uttered the single word faintly, nervously. Abram Brackett aroused.

"Alice, come to me!" he gently directed.

The blind girl obeyed, and he clasped his arm around her. She trembled, and was manifestly excited, but, on the whole, was calmer than was to be expected.

"My daughter," said the Iron Judge, with great tenderness in his voice then, "you have come just in time to deny a base statement. It has been said that you are acquainted with the actor, Garry Kean, but I know it to be untrue. Speak, my child, and deny it!"

"Who has said it?"

"Sheriff White."

"Is he her keeper?" stridently demanded Electa Parsons. "Who made him censor of her acts? What business is it o' his'n?"

"It is none of my business," White quickly returned, "and I have no fault to find; no complaint to make. I merely stated that Miss Brackett and the man have often walked together—"

"Is that a crime?"

The question came from the blind girl. Her hesitation suddenly vanished; she drew her slight form erect; she confronted the sheriff with indignation; and it was plain that she had inherited a measure of her father's firmness.

"I never said it was," White meekly responded.

"Since you are so interested in my acts," pursued the girl, severely, "I will admit that I have walked with Mr. Hubert Lawrence. What of it? Have I no right to acquaintances? Is there a law at Jack's Delight which makes the sheriff say who shall walk, and who shall stay constantly in-doors?"

"Don't! don't!" groaned White. "The Lord knows I don't set up as your critic. Garry Kean—Lawrence, I mean—just say for me that I haven't assumed to make that a part of my business!"

Garry Kean's lip curled scornfully.

"While you are my accuser I will not be your defender," he curtly replied.

The troubled expression on Brackett's face had given place to one of utter severity. To his profound surprise his daughter had admitted a part of the story told by the sheriff. It had been a severe blow to him, for he had felt sure she would deny all, and could do so truthfully. That she was acquainted with such a man as Garry Kean—had even walked with him—dumfounded the Iron Judge. He felt like sending Kean to prison for life, and, as he could not do that, determined upon the course nearest to it.

"No more need be said now," he coldly interrupted. "White, I infer that you know your business. If the prisoner is a horse-thief, take him to jail at once."

"Father!" cried Alice, "I protest. Mr. Lawrence is not guilty. It will be a cruel act if you let him go to jail!"

"Peace, my child, peace!" huskily directed the judge. "He will have a fair trial. Let the law take its course. This scene is painful to me. We will go inside—I wish to talk with you. No injustice shall be done."

"I am the one most concerned here—listen to me, father! I am ready to talk with you, but I protest against Mr. Lawrence going to jail until you have heard us both."

"But, my daughter, the public exposure—"

"We will all go in!"

"I am reluctant to have that man cross the threshold."

Brackett lowered his voice as he spoke, but the words reached Kean's ears. He flushed slightly, but answered without a trace of bitterness:

"Rest easy, sir; I will not pollute your residence!"

"We will all go in," hurriedly announced the judge.

He looked almost despairingly at the curious crowd. Under ordinary circumstances, with the prisoner before him, he would have leveled one finger, pointed toward the jail, and tersely ordered, "Take him away!" Under the existing circumstances, he could not do that. Alice was concerned in the case, and the Iron Judge was almost ready to sink with shame. To him, it was something terrible that his daughter was mixed up with such a fellow as Garry Kean; and the sight of the assembled citizens staring at them, reduced the case to the lowest depth of disgrace.

Silently he stood aside; silently he pointed; and Alice, Electa, White and the prisoner entered. The judge followed, and he went with the determination to punish and crush the accused man.

CHAPTER IV.

BLIND ALICE SPEAKS.

A MONTH prior to the scenes just described a wandering theatrical company had stopped at Jack's Delight. They had two plays with which they intended to thrill the people for the space of one week. The first was a farce-comedy of some merit; the other was a drama of the mines which had more noise than merit.

For three nights the comedy held the boards and was fairly successful, but the drama of the mines did not please the critics. Said critics were not literary writers; they were miners. They disapproved; they said so; they killed the drama summarily.

In this dilemma it was proposed to revive the comedy, but another plan prevailed. Among the miners was one known as English John. This man had been in America less than half his total years of life, and before that had always lived in London. When in the latter place he had been an inveterate theater-goer, and tragic acting had been his hobby.

There had been real-life tragedies at Jack's Delight, but none upon the stage; and when he heard of the hitch in the programme, he came solidly to the front. He talked to his companions, and the result was a big petition that the company would give them Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar."

The request was granted; the play was presented.

The hit of the evening was made by a young actor who took the part of Marc Antony. The stirring lines were well delivered, and the miners found something manly enough for their taste.

English John, in particular, was enthusiastic and he hammered the floor with his heavy boots until he contracted a lameness which kept him company for a week.

Hubert Lawrence was the name of the actor who had so pleased the veteran, and the former would have gone away from Jack's Delight a strong favorite had it not been for an unfortunate occurrence which followed the entertainment. That night several men slept in jail, while Hubert Lawrence lay in an improvised hospital with a knife-wound in his side.

Explanations of the affair differed, and conflicting stories were in circulation.

The theatrical company affirmed that, after the play was over, one of the miners approached a minor actress with whom he had no acquaintance, asked her to be his wife and, being refused, tried to take her away by force; that Hubert Lawrence knocked him down; and that an affray followed in which a dozen men took part, several of whom were slightly wounded, and Lawrence, quite severely.

The miner, in defense, claimed that he had flirted with the actress through the week; that she had led him on deliberately; and that he had her promise to leave the company after that evening and remain at Jack's Delight as his wife.

The facts of the case were not learned. The theatrical company was anxious to get away; they saw the miner and a compromise was effected; the miner left the town and traveled north; and the actors left and traveled south. Thus, the whole affair would soon have dropped into oblivion but for one thing.

Hubert Lawrence had not been able to travel, and he was left behind.

Days of convalescence followed. If any guilt attached to him there was no one to make a charge, and it was clear that none would be made. His only concern was his health, and as he had good care and a good constitution, he soon began to mend. Those who took care of him came to like him, and he was described as an honest, intelligent, good-natured young man.

But there was another rumor abroad. Some one had started the theory that the actress had really flirted with the miner; that her object was to get money out of him; and that Lawrence was her ally in the plot. Rumor is a swift racer; the story spread; and, by the time the wounded actor was able to get about again, he found that he had a bad reputation and but few friends.

He soon won over some of his enemies.

One burly fellow made the charge directly and coarsely; Lawrence denied it and, finding that his accuser could give no proof, demanded an apology; it was refused, and then the still pale-faced actor went in and solidly whipped the big fellow of robust health. After that, nobody told him to his face that he aided to entrap a man and tried to swindle him out of his money.

From the start English John had been the wounded man's friend. He could not turn coldly away from the sick-bed of a man who could play tragedy well; he became Lawrence's nurse, and, later, his stanch defender and sincere friend. When with the miners, he sung Lawrence's praises as a man and an actor, and talked learnedly of more celebrated actors whom he had seen and heard of in England, and with whose merits he was perfectly at home.

He talked so persistently about Macready, Garrick and Kean that it came to pass that a sobriquet was coined for the wounded man, and when he became able to move about, nobody spoke of him as Hubert Lawrence; the excellencies of the old English tragedians, Garrick and Kean, were brought to bear on the modern disciple of the stage, and as "Garry Kean" he was universally known.

With some this nickname became an affectionate title, but his enemies remained in the majority. Twice he had brought a citizen of the place to grief in personal encounter, and the rank and file hated him for it. Even they treated him respectfully; since victory just after he rose from a sick-bed, and the humbling of the big bully, compelled all to admit that Kean was a man with backbone, and they let him alone.

Such was the man whose name was now associated with Alice Brackett's, and deep was her father's chagrin. He disliked and suspected the young man. He was prejudiced at the start by the fact that Lawrence was an actor; the trouble in regard to the actress was not a pleasant affair; and the fact that Garry had whipped a scandal-monger did not elevate him in the eyes of the Iron Judge.

It was with a heavy heart that Brackett followed the party into the house, as described in the previous chapter.

He closed the door and turned to Sheriff White.

"Take your prisoner into the west room. I wish to speak with my daughter alone."

The order was obeyed, and then the judge took Alice's hand and led her to the east room. Electa looked wishful, but her master imperiously motioned her away. He was soon alone with his daughter, with the door closed to all prying eyes.

He noticed that Alice was pale and trembling and his stern face softened.

"Child," he said, gently, "I hope you are not afraid of me. I think no ill of you."

"You are angry!" she exclaimed.

"Sorely troubled, if you will."

"I am sorry that I—"

She hesitated, stopped, and he finished the sentence.

"That you are acquainted with that man. Yet, Alice, I feel sure you should not be blamed. You are but eighteen years old; a child at heart and a child of misfortune. Your sightless eyes cannot be expected to see into another's heart. That man is world-wise and crafty, and he has used a villain's arts to win your heart—"

"No, no; don't say that!" the girl cried, hurriedly.

"Do you defend him?"

"I do, for he is worthy of my esteem."

"Alice!"

She put out her hands imploringly.

"Don't blame me."

"Blame you! Have I done that, child?"

"You have, in your heart!"

"I swear that you are wrong, Alice. I would trust you—believe in you—against the evidence of all the rest of the world, and of my own eyes. No, no; I do not blame you in the least; but I do blame the scoundrel—"

"Father!"

"Well, well, child, I will be—patient."

There was more in his mind than he made known. He was in a pitiful state of doubt, uncertainty and mental pain, but he was determined to investigate carefully and patiently. If Garry Kean was blameless he should not be blamed, but if guilty, he should be crushed if it was in the judge's power—and he did not see how the actor could be otherwise than guilty.

Alice was nervous and frightened, and her slender hands moved restlessly about and around each other. She was like a fluttering, frightened bird, and even more helpless.

"I have a confession to make," she said, in a very low voice.

"Go on, my child."

"I have known Mr. Lawrence for a long time."

"Not before the—the actors came here?"

"Oh! no; not so long as that; but nearly ever since he was injured."

The Iron Judge frowned.

"How did it come about?"

"I called at Mrs. Warren's, where he lay wounded and ill, and she said she was wholly tired out caring for him; and he was very nervous and wanted some one with him, to talk with him. She had watched the night before, because English John could not be there, and as it was already noon, she needed sleep."

"Go on!"

"So I—I told her I would go in and sit with him."

"Well?"

"He was not so very ill, then, and would have been up and around had not the doctor's orders been peremptory that he should keep in bed; so there he lay and tried to read, but found it very dull. I went in and sat with him while Mrs. Warren slept."

The speaker paused for a reply. Brackett's teeth were firmly closed, but he made an effort to open them and speak naturally.

"Go on, Alice!"

"Was that wrong?"

"No; but I hope you will never do so again."

The blind girl sighed, hesitated, and then continued:

"I sat with him that day, and he was so grateful that I went again. I went every day for a week, and we talked together. On the eighth day he was able for the first time to sit up, and when I saw how improved he was, I went there no more."

"You did not tell me of this."

"No, because, not ten minutes after I came home the first time, I heard you speak very harshly of him. You gave no reasons, and I thought you were wrong. Perhaps I ought not to have gone again, but I pitied him in his affliction—I knew what affliction was!"

The judge clinched his hands like one who is suffering physical pain.

"Proceed!" he directed.

"The next time I saw him we met by chance outside the village, and walked together for half an hour."

"More than once?"

"Several times," she admitted.

"Well?"

"As for to-day," Alice resumed, with sudden increase of voice, "the charge against Mr. Lawrence is infamous. He hired a team in the village, and as he chanced to overtake me—it was only chance—I went to ride with him."

"Where was Electa?"

"She went to walk with me, but waited while I went to ride."

"Did she advise you to go?"

"She advised against it."

"Has she known of your other meetings with the man?"

"No. She never suspected them. Don't blame Electa."

"Why was Lawrence arrested?"

"They basely accused him of stealing the team. He hired it, and then the man—it was Aaron Barney—went to the sheriff and said Mr. Lawrence had stolen it. He must have hated Mr. Lawrence."

Brackett shook his head gloomily.

"We were returning when the sheriff first saw us. We went as far as the road to the American Mine, and then turned back. Does that look as though the team was stolen? Do horse-thieves return with their plunder?"

The girl spoke warmly, but the expression of deep gloom did not leave Judge Brackett's face.

"It is plain that you have a friendly feeling for Lawrence."

"I have, sir!" was the quick, frank reply.

The judge suspected that friendship had ripened into love, and longed to ask the question, but dared not. To him Alice seemed only a child, and the remark from any one that she had a woman's love for Garry Kean would have seemed nothing short of sacrilege.

"I will now see Lawrence!" he announced.

CHAPTER V.

TWO MEN UPON THE RACK.

THE judge's voice unconsciously grew stern, and a frightened expression appeared on Alice's face.

"What shall you say to him?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"You must not blame him!"

"Must not, Alice?"

"Oh! father, father! don't break my heart!"

She had been standing with her hand in his, and at the last words she threw her arms around his neck and broke into tears. If Abram Brackett desired an answer to the question he had not dared to ask, he had it then. He knew that she cared for Hubert Lawrence, and it was certain that she did not suffer more than he did then. All his love and all his hopes were bound up in her, and it was a hard blow to know that she cared for such a man as he believed the actor to be.

Controlling himself with a great effort he soothed her until she grew calmer, and then, saying a few words to reassure her, sent her away.

He was ready for Garry Kean, but had to pause to collect his wits and calmness. He was no longer an "iron" judge; he was so weak that an enemy might have pitied him. He took time to grow self-possessed before sending for Kean, and when that young man entered he saw no signs of emotion.

As Brackett looked on the bench, trying criminals, so looked he then. He was calm, stern, grim, almost forbidding. He pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he curtly directed.

The younger man bowed and silently obeyed.

"It is not my custom to hear cases before they are brought before me in due form," pursued the Iron Judge, "but I will listen to you if you will talk. What about this horse and carriage alleged to have been stolen?"

"The outfit was hired, not stolen, sir," was the respectful reply.

"Does the owner agree with you?"

"He does not."

"How do you account for this discrepancy?"

"Obviously, there is a plot against me."

"On the part of the owner of the horse?"

"There is some one back of him. I have enemies here, and they have planned to get me into trouble."

"What enemies?"

"Those made when I necessarily punished a villain for speaking falsely about me. I made my first enemy when I struck a man who molested a lady-member of Hereford's theatrical company. From these enemies come the outrageous statement that I had conspired with said lady to extort money from the man. I met this lie by chastising a person who dared fling it in my face—hence, I infer, is trouble."

"You seem to get into a good deal of trouble."

"You are right."

"Will Hereford and your fellow-actors come to your rescue?"

"I suppose they are now in California."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Clear myself and punish my enemies!"

"It strikes me you have done about enough 'punishing.' You struck a man who tried to make the acquaintance of an actress, and got the wound which put you in bed for a fortnight. Then you chastised another man who offended you, and, according to your theory, this arrest is the result. Would you not do well to quit 'punishing' men, and keep the peace?"

"And submit to insult?" asked Garry Kean, his face flushing.

"Prudence is sometimes better than courage."

"Be that as it may, there is a limit to endurance. My first breach of the peace, if you insist upon the term, was to save a lady from a brute; my second was to give a lesson to a man who had slandered me foully. It is probable that if I am similarly placed again, when I secure my liberty, I shall do precisely as I did before."

"You seem to be a fire-eater."

"Excuse me, sir; I am merely a man who,

when too hard pressed, turns against the oppressors."

"So it seems. 'The Man with Backbone,' I hear you called here. Where is your home?"

"In the East."

"Is your real name Hubert Lawrence?"

"You must excuse me from answering. I have a home, and honorable relatives; and I have never done ought to bring discredit upon the family name; but while I am under arrest as a horse-thief, I must decline to make any statements which will carry my unmerited disgrace to the eyes of those who know me well."

The Iron Judge smiled skeptically. He had heard talk like this before, and afterward learned that the speakers were old in villainy.

"You propose, then, to meet this charge without summoning friends to certify to your character?"

"I do."

"Suppose you fail to prove your innocence?"

"I shall prove it—how, I can't say, for no one heard me bargain with Aaron Barney for the team. I can prove, however, that I drove away openly, and that I was on my way back to the town when arrested."

The judge leaned back in his chair and fixed a keen gaze upon his companion.

"My daughter accompanied you on this ride, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

Garry Kean met Brackett's gaze frankly, but there was not either defiance or impudence in his manner. On the contrary, there was all requisite respect—and a trace of anxiety.

"I was not aware until to-day that she knew you," pursued the judge, a harder reflection creeping into his voice.

"Circumstances threw us together, sir."

"I should say so. Pray, what circumstance caused you to keep me ignorant of the acquaintance?"

"Well, I hardly know," responded Kean, with some embarrassment. "We did not meet—"

"You did not come to this house?"

"No, sir."

"What was your reason? Did you think I should not be glad to receive you?"

"I thought very likely you had a prejudice against me, sir, but—"

"Why should you think that?"

"I have been the victim of circumstances and enemies since I came here, which have made my career unfortunate—"

"Enough, sir; you have admitted what I wished!" severely interrupted the Iron Judge. "Since you came to Jack's Delight you have been involved in numerous broils, and, be the causes what they may, have committed numerous breaches of the peace. You confess that you thought I had a prejudice against you— Wait, sir, wait! Hear me out!"

The speaker had sternly checked Garry Kean's attempt to defend himself, and he steadily continued:

"My daughter, sir, is not only sadly afflicted, but she is a child in years. Despite this you have made her acquaintance secretly, continued it secretly, pitting your worldly wisdom against her inexperience, and you admit that you believed I would not approve of this intimacy if I knew of it. What have you to say in defense of such—such conduct?"

"Atrocious conduct," he had nearly said, but he checked the impulse by a strong effort.

The Man with Backbone was flushed and worried. Physical courage went for but little then, and he was being severely tried.

"I am not sure that I can make a defense which will satisfy you," he answered; "but I will say this: I found Miss Brackett a pleasant acquaintance, and a most estimable young lady. As to my own conduct, I will leave it to her if I have ever failed in my duty as a gentleman. Last of all, while well aware that many persons here were prejudiced against me, I had hoped to end by convincing you that I was worthy of your respect."

"In order to do this, you kept up a secret acquaintance with my daughter, an afflicted child!"

"Pardon me, sir, but the future would have vindicated me."

"How?"

"Under the circumstances, I cannot state."

Brackett assumed his severest demeanor.

"During my term of office as a judge I have had a good many persons brought before me. Naturally, when a criminal gets into the grasp of the law, he seeks to find a way out, and the excuses made, and defenses offered, are varied and many. Some of them are wonderfully ingenious, while many that are clumsy command notice because they are so earnest; but I must say that I never heard a more gauze-like, weaker defense than yours!"

"Probably because, unlike criminals, I will not lie."

"I have a proposition to make to you."

"Yes, sir."

The judge moved restlessly in his chair. A close observer would have said that he had grown old in the last few hours. Certainly, his countenance bore a haggard look not natural to it.

"I have sat a good many years upon the bench, here and at other towns," he pursued, "and never before have I aided to baffle justice by saving a criminal from punishment. Now, however, I am going to disgrace myself."

He pressed his hand to his head wearily.

"Well, sir?" questioned Garry Kean.

"If you will swear to promptly leave Idaho, and never communicate with any one here, I will see that the jail doors open for you to go out before morning!"

"Sir?" exclaimed the prisoner.

"Do I fail to speak plainly?"

"You speak too plainly."

"Well?"

"You offer me liberty at the price of dishonor!"

"To you?"

"To me!"

"Dishonor!" repeated the judge, with sarcasm. "Since when did you become so fastidious?"

The calmness which the Man with Backbone had maintained by a strong effort had vanished. He was angry, and he took but little pains to hide the fact.

"Why do you propose this?" he asked.

"To save the Brackett name from disgrace."

"Will this be done if you free an accused prisoner?"

"My share in the escape will never be known, probably; even if it is, better that than the association of my daughter's name with yours by the lips of scandal!"

"Sir, you humiliate me cruelly!" Kean exclaimed.

"Humiliate!" echoed Brackett, sharply. "Just Heaven! what do you think of me? Humiliation is a weak word—I would exchange places with the wandering cur of the street, if I could thereby save Alice from the hands of the gossips!"

Perspiration had started to his forehead, and he brushed it away nervously.

"Sir," answered Garry Kean, mildly, "we do not understand each other. I am as anxious as you concerning Miss Brackett, and deeply regret—"

"Say no more!" was the peremptory interruption. "Do you, or do you not, accept my offer?"

CHAPTER VI.

AND NOW COMES A FAIR POLITICIAN.

"I SHALL remain and face my accusers!"

Garry Kean made the assertion firmly, yet in a manner so quiet that it would have favorably influenced any disinterested person.

"You disgust me," Brackett irritably observed.

"Would you have me run away like a criminal? If I go, I put the brand of guilt ineffaceably upon myself."

"And escape further trouble."

"I am sorry to disappoint you, judge, but I shall remain and meet trial. If anything like a fair chance is given me, I shall prove my innocence. My friends are not numerous—indeed, I think I shall have to rely solely upon English John to help me get evidence—but I trust in that Providence which does not desert the deserving."

"Is this your ultimatum?"

"It is, sir."

"And you refuse to accept liberty?"

"At the price of dishonor—yes!"

"Bear in mind that, though I shall sit as your judge, I shall show no partiality. If the weight of evidence is against you, you must take the consequences."

"I ask no favors!" was the somewhat haughty reply.

Judge Brackett rose.

"There is no need of further words!" he observed, icily.

He stepped toward the door to call Sheriff White, but Garry Kean checked him.

"One moment, if you please, sir. I have in your presence asserted my innocence; I have said that I am of good family; I have asked you to think better of me than you seem able. I do not ask for mercy—the mercy accorded criminals—but for justice. You have not believed me, yet I feel no ill will toward you. One word only have I to add: The time will come, Judge Brackett, when you will know I am innocent, and that I have told the truth!"

The elder man silently bowed. His stern face did not change; there was not even a skeptical smile to betray his lack of belief; yet his cold silence had a voice of its own, and it said:

"The old cry of criminals! They have seen 'better days'; they are always innocent; they could tell wonderful things if they would; they are sure to be vindicated in the end!"

Abram Brackett was not rightly constituted to occupy the bench of justice and retain confidence in mankind. He fully intended to be just, but he had come to believe that villainy was so common that few men were without the ingredient to their character.

He opened the door, and Sheriff White came at his call. He motioned toward Garry Kean.

"The prisoner is at your disposal, White."

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders.

"I thought you wouldn't find any good in him."

Kean's eyes flashed, but he remained silent.

The sheriff touched his shoulder.

"Come, critter!"

There was a degree of insolence in the order, and it added to the smoldering fire in the actor's mind. That the fire did not burst forth into a raging blaze was only due to the strong control he exercised over his passions. He would not have been so silent if he had had no one but himself to think of then. Misfortune had followed him closely since his coming to Jack's Delight. He was desperate and angry, and felt like avenging his wrongs, but, knowing well that every act would be keenly felt by Alice Brackett, he held his peace.

Silently he obeyed the sheriff; with a slow, firm step he walked toward the door.

At that point he paused for a moment and looked back toward a stern-faced master of the house. That glance was not angry or vindictive, but it was gifted with a voice of its owner.

"You will some day learn that you have wronged me," it seemed to say.

A moment more and he was gone.

Brackett started as the door closed behind officer and prisoner.

"He takes it hard," the judge muttered. "It's a pity such a man should be a villain. His gifts, rightly used, would fit him for good positions. I almost feel— Nonsense! the man is an actor, and that farewell glance was his masterpiece!"

The speaker threw himself irritably into a chair.

"I must go to Alice, but not yet. I want to think. My child is menaced! The tongue of gossip will connect her name with that of this fellow, and—Heaven help her!—I am afraid it will not be her hardest trial. Just Heaven! why did I not suspect that fatal acquaintance!"

He leaned his head upon his hand. Some sort of support seemed necessary; to him it seemed as though his brain had turned to a ball of lead.

Several minutes passed. He considered various plans only to reject them all. None suited him. He who had always been so ready with ways and means to accomplish a desired end was in this case wholly at fault. Never before had he grappled with a subject so vast. The affairs of state; the conduct of the court of justice; the pleas, when he was a lawyer, to save a client—all these were matters weighing as nothing in the light of the new problem.

Alice!—Alice and her happiness!

How was the end to be attained?

Not then did he see his way clear, and he finally arose with an impatient movement.

"The Iron Judge!" he muttered, irritably.

"What a misnomer! I am a man like a reed; I am weak, horribly weak!"

The sound of a carriage outside caused him to look from the window. A stylish equipage was there; one that boasted two fine black horses and a uniformed knight of the reins; and in the showy carriage was a richly-dressed, handsome woman. It was no new sight to Abram Brackett. The outfit was his own; the lady was his wife.

It was known at Jack's Delight that Alice Brackett's mother had died in Alice's infancy, and no one referred to the fact so often as the present Mrs. Brackett. She was only thirty-five years of age, and, believing that she looked younger than that, she was careful not to have the inference go abroad that she was the maternal parent of a young lady eighteen years old.

Mrs. Brackett was a distinct feature of Jack's Delight life. She was the meteor of its existence; the gorgeous luminary which all might gaze upon and admire, but only a few address. Mrs. Brackett knew her place, and if others did not, they were duly instructed. It was almost a daily sight to see her speeding through the village behind her spirited black horses and her wonderful coachman. The latter felt honored by the fact that he was in her service. Mrs. Brackett despised him, but adored his highly-English uniform.

Mrs. Brackett was a "high-flyer." She deeply regretted that she was not a star in fashionable Eastern society, but the fact that the firmament in which she moved was the lowly one of Jack's Delight, was not allowed to crush her. She managed to cut a wide swath, as it were, and fairly radiated style. She kept abreast the times, and stood a fair chance of getting ahead of them. She was the social delight of her set, and held its members in the hollow of her pretty hand.

The poor and lowly were never heard to speak highly of Agatha Brackett, but that did not trouble her. The select world of the town—composed of about twenty persons—adored her, and she was happy.

The Iron Judge's face did not change at sight of her. Her return was not hailed as a happy circumstance. Possibly he was not one of those few who adored her. They lived in peace, as far as was known, but Abram Brackett was considered not a demonstrative man. He cared but little for society and style; he was rarely seen out of doors in his wife's company. People,

however, said they made a fine couple, and they certainly did, as far as looks went.

Brackett stood with his hands crossed behind his back as his wife entered. He was stern and unmoved; she came in like a beautiful whirlwind.

Nature had been kind to Mrs. Brackett. She was a tall, queenly brunette, with splendid black hair and rosy cheeks. If ever a queen *did* look like her, that queen was a magnificent-looking woman. Fashionable, tasteful garments, and diamonds, and a limited number of furbelows, bedecked Mrs. Brackett, and she looked like a small section of Murray Hill dropped bodily in the poor, insignificant Western mining-town.

"So you're in, judge?" was the lady's brisk greeting, as she deftly removed her gloves.

"Yes, Mrs. Brackett."

"I wanted to see you."

"Did you?" was the careless response.

"Yes."

Mrs. Brackett dropped into a chair and smiled upon her husband.

"Whom do you think I have seen?" she added eagerly.

"I have no idea."

"Colonel Yoke Norman."

"Ah!"

"What do you think he said?"

"I have no idea."

"Your indifference is provoking!" cried Mrs. Brackett, and there certainly was some reason for the reproof; he answered like a machine, and appeared scarcely to hear what she said.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Brackett," was the courteous apology. "Pray proceed."

"Did you ever hear that Caesar was ambitious?"

"So it is said."

"The colonel has contracted Caesar's trouble."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; but of one thing rest assured—if Colonel Yoke Norman is offered any crown, he will not put it aside."

"What does Norman want now?"

"He wants a certain office, and desires my aid and yours. He wants to be mayor of this city."

For the first time Abram Brackett evinced interest. He frowned and became more attentive; he had not forgotten the ruling passion of the "Reds," and this news was very timely. Elijah Nicholson was Mayor of Jack's Delight, while both Nathan Bradley and Colonel Yoke Norman aspired to succeed him. As he no doubt wished to succeed himself, it appeared that the political pot was beginning to boil in earnest.

"Is every one crazy after the paltry office?" sharply demanded Brackett.

"Paltry! Is that what you call it?"

"What does it amount to?"

"What better position is there in town?"

"None."

"Yet you refused it a year ago, and told me only a week since that you would not take it."

"You report me correctly. I shall never hold any office except that of judge."

"We won't argue that old matter; as I have told you, I have another scheme. Colonel Yoke Norman has asked our aid, and I have promised it."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. I dare say Mayor Nicholson will feel hurt, but one must look out for one's self: Long live Mayor Norman!"

Mrs. Brackett swung her gloves enthusiastically, and looked prettier than ever. She might have her undesirable points, but the political candidate who could count her among his adherents ought to be happy.

"Bear in mind that he is not elected yet," dryly replied the judge.

"Ah! but he will be!"

"How about Elijah Nicholson?"

"His ship will sink. Why not? He's been mayor for a year, why shouldn't he give some one else a chance?"

"Suppose still other men aspire to the office?"

"Let them, if they wish. The moment we come out for Colonel Yoke Norman the matter will be settled."

"Mrs. Brackett, do you remember that I have always said that I was no politician, and that under no circumstances would I take part in politics or become a partisan of any man?"

The lady's face fell.

"Surely, that was empty talk," she exclaimed.

"It was sincere."

"But now I wish you to help the colonel for my sake."

"I deeply regret that I am compelled to refuse."

"But he has promised that I shall be the leader at all official balls and dinners. You know he is a bachelor, and some lady must have the place. His house holds only servants now."

"Let him marry, then. As for us, Mrs. Brackett, I hope you will abandon the idea for my sake. Too much of this so-called 'fashionable' clap-trap wearies me. Please give up the idea—"

"I shall not give it up," declared the lady, "and if you persist in your refusal there will be trouble!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE COURSE OF DOMESTIC LIFE FLOWS
ROUGHLY.

MRS. BRACKETT was angry! This was nothing new, as the servants of the house could testify, but it was seldom that she had occasion to feel offended at the judge. He left her unrestricted mistress of her time and conduct, and treated her with dignified politeness, which pleased her quite as well as affection; and as a result, there was usually peace in the higher department of the Brackett house.

On this occasion the prevailing rule was reversed. Mrs. Brackett was angry, and the flash of her eyes boded no good to the future. In one way the fair lady gained by the change. Her cheeks were flushed, and this, with the magnificent sparkle of her eyes made her handsomer than ever.

Abram Brackett could not appreciate her beauty just then, and he sighed as he answered:

"Do not speak hastily, Agatha. Let us discuss this point. Why should you care to accept Colonel Norman's offer? Is there a woman in the city who can rival you under existing conditions?"

"They think they can."

"If there is such a person it must be Mrs. Nicholson, but her only hold is her husband's position. She certainly is not beautiful or charming."

"Do you suppose she would admit the fact?"

"She ought to be aware of it."

"For a judge, your simplicity is charming. There never was a woman yet who thought herself destitute of charms; there never will be one. Nonsense! Why do I talk? This matter is not open to argument. Logic will not put a woman down; the only way to humble her is to crush her. You know as well as I do that if you would consent to run for the mayor's office you would be elected, and I should rule as undisputed queen of Jack's Delight. When I consented to come to this then-barbarous place you told me I could easily rule the society which would grow up here."

"I think you do so now."

"What of Mrs. Nicholson, Mrs. Reed and Mrs. Ray?"

"When there is an evening gathering you get all the attention, and they get none."

"True," Mrs. Brackett complacently replied; "folks are not blind. Still, those women have money and position, if not charms. They flatter me, fawn upon me, hate me, all at once. They must be crushed—so!"

She extended her hand and slowly closed it, with the pantomime of "crushing" her enemies.

"Suppose you outdo them entirely, where will you find the equals to associate with?"

"Equals! There are none here who are my equals. Circumstances have forced me to look upon them; to allow them to live, as I may say; but I despise them. What would they be without the money of their husbands? Nothing! And that is what I will make them. Do you understand, judge? *Nothing!*"

"How can you take pleasure in such an ambition?" Brackett gravely asked.

His wife made a contemptuous motion.

"All men and women save you are ambitious. How was it with Caesar?"

"How did Caesar end?"

"Bah! don't think to frighten me. Had Caesar been a woman, he would never have fallen from his high estate. He could win battles on the field, but when it came to diplomacy, he was weak. If Caesar had been a woman, he would have bound to him irrevocably the knaves who finally took his life. Perhaps you wonder how. I'll tell you. He would have set a snare for each and all of them, got them in his power, and then held them as a cat holds a mouse!"

Mrs. Brackett spoke with force and enthusiasm. She knew herself well, and knew her own wishes. She was ambitious, and in that passion lay the motive, the ruling spirit and the hereafter of her life. She ought not to have been the wife of a man living in a Western mining-town.

There is no more resistless force than a woman who aspires to reach giddy heights. Her course is usually headlong, and if she fails, and falls with the fight unwon, she goes down in a blaze of glory. It may be only the ephemeral glare of the shooting star, but she likes the sparkle and the glitter, and is happy in her brief notoriety.

Judge Brackett knew his wife's failing. Her ambition was the bane of his life; it had steadfastly stood between them and happiness; it had made her disregard the duties of home; it had been the means of keeping them on a polite footing which was more appropriate to strangers than to man and wife.

He heard her latest declamatory outburst patiently, and then modestly replied:

"I think, Mrs. Brackett, it would be more to our credit to let these rival politicians fight their battle alone."

"Are you a clod, sir?" cried the woman of ambition.

"Not at present."

The judge sighed as he spoke. He was in a melancholy mood, and, just then, felt that the senseless clods were to be envied.

"Then have some animation. Come; shall

we be Colonel Yoke Norman's allies?" Mrs. Brackett asked.

At any other time the judge would have refused, kindly but firmly, but he remembered Nathan Bradley's demand, and there was something like grim humor in his reply:

"Give me time!"

"How long?"

"Say forty-eight hours."

"Will you decide by that time?"

"Yes."

"So be it, then. I begin to have some hope of you; I may make a man of you yet. I caution you not to get into one of your 'iron' moods, and refuse me. In forty-eight hours!"

"In forty-eight hours!" repeated Brackett, thinking how he was to give Bradley a like answer at that time.

The lady arose.

"I will leave you now," she observed.

"Stay a moment!" directed Brackett, with a sudden return of deep gravity. "Have you heard any rumor—that is, any report which—"

His reluctant tongue was saved from asking the question.

"Do you refer," asked his wife, "to the report which associates the names of Alice and that Garry Kean?"

"Yes."

"I am astonished!" cried Mrs. Brackett, tragically. "Has Alice gone mad? Has the girl no judgment? Has she no consideration for me?"

"For you?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"I do not comprehend."

"Don't you see that, when I am struggling hard to lift our family to an elevated position, it is a severe blow to have a thoughtless child bring comment upon me?"

"Is that your main consideration?"

"Most certainly."

"What about Alice, herself?"

"Oh! I presume she don't feel it!"

The contracted brows and stern face of the judge heralded an approaching storm, and he now spoke severely:

"Agatha, will you forget your supreme selfishness for awhile? Do you not see that Alice will be the chief sufferer? Her sacred name will be on the lips of every gossip."

"And the effects will be upon me!" pettishly added Mrs. Brackett.

"Be silent! I cannot bear too much!"

"Judge Brackett!" exclaimed the lady, with feezing hauteur.

"Well?"

"Did you order me to 'be silent?' Since when did I become a servant? Since when—"

"Listen to me, Agatha! I did not intend to offend you, but trouble has upset me wholly—"

"And you the 'Iron Judge!'"

"I am weak, horribly weak, where Alice is concerned."

"Always 'Alice!'"

Brackett's face flushed perceptibly, but he raised his head proudly, and his regard and speech were equally steady as he answered:

"Always 'Alice,' with me. She is my daughter, and her affliction binds her to me with chains of steel. I should be a brute if I forgot the duty I owe her, but I cannot forget; she has been a dear and dutiful child, and my love for her is as instinctive as the impulse of respiration; it is stronger than my own love of life. She has not had the advantages in life possessed by the rest of us. Her sightless eyes have not been able to study the faces of men and women, and read there the language of their minds—the index of their secret natures. She relies upon intuition to tell her whom to like, and whom not to like, and who can be always right under such conditions?"

"What in the world does all this mean?" demanded the queen of Jack's Delight, impatiently.

The judge steadily continued:

"Now that she has made a mistake it is not to be wondered at, but we must shield her, as far as possible, from the consequences of her unfortunate acquaintance with the actor."

"And horse-thief!"

Brackett made a deprecating gesture.

"Now," added the lady, "do come to the point!"

"I will. You, Agatha, have always ignored Alice—"

"What! do you presume to give me lessons in propriety?" cried Mrs. Brackett.

"Be patient, Agatha. This is a time when the past should be forgotten. Are you not willing to help Alice?"

"If? How?"

"Comments have before now been made on the fact that she is never seen, abroad or at home, in your company—"

"I have no wish to compel her."

"But now it would crush one-half of this unfortunate scandal, and vastly help Alice, if you would make her your companion in your drives, your calls, your receptions. Show that you approve of her, and the hydra-headed demon of gossip will be given a severe blow."

Mrs. Brackett's lip had curled in scorn. She was Abram Brackett's wife, but she had never considered herself Alice Brackett's mother. She had no ill will toward the first Mrs. Brackett—

on the contrary, she could not help feeling some gratitude to the woman who had made room for a successor by giving up her own life—but she had never been disposed to burden herself with Alice.

In one way she had never been a cruel step-mother; her hand had never been raised in anger against Alice; but she had totally ignored the girl, and they were almost the same as strangers.

Of late she had observed that Alice was growing very pretty, and the present proposition would have been rejected with the eagerness of a selfish woman who foresees a rival, had not an idea suddenly occurred to the female Caesar.

Her eyes brightened, and she replied:

"I will comply on one condition."

"What is that?" doubtfully inquired Brackett.

"I will carefully chaperon Alice to please you if, to please me, you will enter the political arena and throw all your influence for Norman!"

CHAPTER VIII.

GARRY KEAN'S FRIEND.

THE Iron Judge looked annoyed for a moment; then his firm face became grim and determined.

"Do you seek to make terms at such a moment?" he sternly asked.

"Why not?" his wife asked.

"Must I pay for, bargain for, what is your duty as my wife?"

"My duty?"

"Your duty, Mrs. Brackett!"

"Is it my duty to render implicit obedience to you?" she haughtily asked.

"Be calm; there is no reason for quarreling. I only say that you are my wife; that the honor of my family is as much in your hands as in mine; and that it is your duty to preserve it. Yes, and your own interests demand it!"

"How so?"

"You aspire to be the queen of this city. Would it not be well to keep scandal from your door?"

"Alice is not my child!"

"Heaven knows you are not a mother to her in fact, or in conduct!" Brackett bitterly exclaimed.

"Do you complain of me?"

"Mrs. Brackett, will you listen to reason? Why waste words in idle talk? Your duty and your interests alike require you to aid Alice. Will you do so?"

"She ought not to have sullied her name."

"Her name is as spotless as that of an angel, and if any man dares assail it, I will shoot him as I would a dog!" uttered the judge, his great eyes flashing. "It is the covert tongue of idle gossip which I dread, and that must be strangled. I deeply regret that Alice ever met Hubert Lawrence, but I remember that she is blind. Not for a moment do I blame her; my heart is full of love and tender pity!"

His voice had grown husky and broken, and in every way he revealed the unbounded love he held for his daughter. It was a noble affection, and all the more striking because it came from one so stern and resolute in all other matters.

Mrs. Brackett listened; Mrs. Brackett watched. She was not moved; she did not feel tender pity for blind Alice.

She did not care a fig for her step-daughter, and her indifference left her free to meditate and scheme.

The judge had said that he would not bargain with her, and she knew how firm he could be. She was crafty, and she saw the way to the goal of her hopes, she believed.

First of all, she must place her husband under obligations to her. Then later, she could work upon his gratitude to accomplish her own objects.

"I suppose it *does* place Alice unpleasantly," confessed the female Caesar, her manner becoming as bland and sunny as the blue skies of Italy; "and I will not desert her in this emergency. You have disappointed me, judge, but I will not forsake her. Rest easy; whatever I can do shall be done!"

Brackett looked at her keenly. Disturbed as he was, he had not lost his powers of perception, and he beheld the sudden change in his wife's manner with suspicion.

Long before, however, he had learned to make the most of small favors, and he did not expect generous devotion to his interests.

"I thank you, Agatha," he replied, with dignified politeness. "You shall not regret whatever you can do for Alice. Just now I will make no suggestions, for I see you are anxious to go, but I will speak with you later."

He courteously opened the door for her; she bowed and passed out, going with graceful courtesy which matched his own. It would have been a good scene for a king's court; it was but a poor one as between man and wife.

Abram Brackett had long been accustomed to expect no more than formality, and when once more alone he considered that matter no further.

There was more serious food for thought.

Only a short time before Mayor Elijah Nicholson had approached him and requested his help in the coming campaign; and now Nathan

Bradley and Colonel Yoke Norman had put in their bids. Every one of the candidates had made a strong effort to secure his support, and to aid one was to morally offend both the others. What the result would be with Bradley, the judge already knew; the candidate of the "Reds" had backed up his request with a threat. He had plainly revealed that he knew a secret in the judge's past; he threatened to reveal it, if his demands were not acceded to satisfactorily.

This matter now became the most serious of all with which Brackett had to deal.

The case of Garry Kean could be handled, and, if any one was known to speak ill of Alice, her father knew how to deal with him.

The secret held by Bradley was wholly different. Arsenic poison can be destroyed by a sweep of the hand; malarial poison is hard to conquer. So with Nathan Bradley. He and his secret made up the malarial poison—sly, secret, insidious, vague, yet deadly. There was much that was mysterious about his power. How did he learn the secret? Of whom had he learned it? Did others share the secret?

These questions Brackett could not answer. An enemy who menaced only himself he could freely meet and never doubt his ability to master, but the sly knave with his secret, the weight of which would fall upon Alice, was a different customer to conquer.

Another caller came to interrupt the judge's meditations—a bluff, stout, red-faced, mutton-chop whiskered man whose nationality stood revealed at a glance.

Brackett knew him well. The new-comer was English John, the miner who has before been mentioned. English as the man was in appearance, he had so long been in America that his old-time mannerisms had disappeared, and he talked like a regular man of the West.

"Judge, I've come on business," he announced.

"Pray proceed."

"It's about Garry Kean."

"Are you a witness against him?"

"Against him?"

The big miner gasped the words, and was dumfounded for a moment, but he quickly rallied.

"Against him! Great Scott, no! Why, Garry an' me are bosom friends; reg'lar Damon an' Pythias, as it were. Why, judge, Garry an' me are pard!"

"Oh!"

"Judge, he's the squarest man that ever lived!"

"Can you prove it?"

"Prove it? Why, I know him!"

"Have you heard of his arrest?"

"I hev, an' that's why I am here. Why, judge, it's an outrageous shame; that's what it is. I didn't think it o' Sheriff White. I'm danged ef that man ever gets a vote from me again!"

English John slapped his ponderous hand ponderously down upon his big knee and looked belligerent.

"White could not ignore the charge," Brackett observed.

"Didn't he know Garry was innocent?"

"No. Do you?"

"Why, of course."

"You will confer a favor upon Lawrence by proving it."

"Innocent! Why, of course he is. Judge, did you see him play Marc Antony?"

"Indeed, I did not!" was the short response.

"You should 'a' seen him!" cried the miner, with unbounded enthusiasm. "I tell ye he jest made Rome howl! I've seen Macready, an' I've heard tell o' Garrick, Kean an' all the rest o' the big fry, but Garry Kean can wax 'em all. Why, when he made the declamation by Cæsar's coffin, I was so worked up that I got a-holt o' my revolver, an' could hardly keep from jumpin' on ter the stage an' tellin' Marc Antony I was with him!"

"We will leave the Roman era, if you please. What about Lawrence?"

"Oh! he's jest as good in comedy. He played 'Sailor Hal,' in the 'Sea-farer's Sweetheart,' like a jewel!"

"That will do!" sharply interrupted Brackett. "Say no more about plays and players. Your friend is in jail. Do you say you can prove his innocence?"

"That's why I called on you. Judge, I'd like ter hev you chip in an' help me save him."

"In what way?"

"Why, he's innocent, an' his friends ought ter rise up an' help him."

Judge Brackett's eyes flashed ominously.

"Do you call me his friend?" he cried.

"Your'e a just man."

"If you believe that, don't ask me to aid that knave!"

"Saint George!"

English John gasped the word in amazement, and his eyes seemed to become several sizes larger.

"I want nothing to do with him. He is a wandering actor; a man known to have engaged in several personal affrays; a man accused of crime; a man afraid to tell his own name—"

"It's Hubert Lawrence."

"Where is his home?"

"I don't know that—"

"No; and you don't know his real name. That Lawrence is his stage-name I am well aware, but he the same as admitted to me that it was no more. He refused to say who he was, or from whence he came."

"He don't want his folks to be worried by news o' his trouble."

"John, you are an honest man, and you mean well in this matter, but I advise you not to stand by Kean any longer. He is a scoundrel!"

The words were uttered with concentrated vehemence which amazed and dismayed the miner.

"Why, judge, you must be jokin'!" he protested.

"I am thoroughly in earnest, and am surprised that a man of your sense should uphold a quarrelsome, suspicious character like Lawrence. You had better turn over a new leaf. You will get no honor, and make no friends, by arraying yourself with him."

"But, great Scott! he's a friend of Miss Brackett's!" John exclaimed.

"If you were not an honest man, English John, I would chastise you for that statement!"

Brackett uttered the words in a low, icy voice, but his unnatural calmness did not hide the hot anger that was raging within him. His face darkened with wrath, and the veins along his forehead swelled perceptibly. The first charge had come; the first free mention of Alice's name; he expected more to follow; and it was no idle threat that he made.

English John leaned back in his chair helplessly.

"I give up! I'm beat!" he muttered.

The judge made no reply.

"I didn't think this," the miner dolefully added.

"You can see how Lawrence is regarded."

"By St. George!" John cried, "he's got one friend left! I know the boy, an' I'll stan' by him through thick an' thin."

"To your own detriment?"

"I never desert a friend."

"Mark my words, Garry Kean will make you a sorry man, some day!"

"Whoever teaches the boy I will make a sorry man!" John fiercely declared.

"Be calm!"

John raised his nose scornfully.

"Go to, you lump o' ice! I want none o' you. I thought you was a decent sort of a man, but mistakes will happen."

"You made one when you came here to induce me to defend Garry Kean. If you take yourself off out of sight you will not be making another."

The miner arose promptly, walked to the door stiffly, and in utter silence, but at that point he turned and slowly enunciated:

"What fools these mortals be!"

And, with this quotation from immortal Shakespeare he bowed profoundly and resumed his exit.

Judge Brackett did not reply or make any hostile movement. There had been a time when such a speech to him in his own house would have been resented promptly, but trouble had left its impression on the Iron Judge. He might talk with other men—might even quarrel—but closer to his mind than any other matters were two oft-recurring questions:

How was he to shield Alice?

How was he to smother Nathan Bradley's secret?

He scarcely heard English John go out. Before the man was on the street the judge was engaged with the all-absorbing problems once more.

CHAPTER IX.

AGAIN THE IRON BENDS.

THE Iron Judge sat with bowed head; the rustling of garments caused him to start; he raised his head and saw Alice. An expression of mingled anxiety and eagerness was on her face, and she turned her head from side to side as though to learn with her auricular organs that which her sightless eyes would not tell her.

"Father!—are you here?" she asked, timidly.

"Yes, my child; I am with you."

"I wanted to speak with you."

"Certainly, Alice. Sit down!"

He arose, placed a chair for her, and with great care and tenderness, assisted her to find it.

"Are we alone, father?" she asked.

"Yes, my child."

"I wanted to—to speak with you about—Mr. Lawrence!" she faltered.

The judge's brow contracted, but his voice lost no part of its former kindness as he answered:

"What about him?"

"Electa saw him taken away to jail."

"It had to be so. The charge was direct and positive. Sheriff White could not ignore it; and I had no right to interfere."

"But you can have him proved innocent?" she asked, eagerly.

"Suppose he is guilty?"

"He is not; indeed, he is not. Who can think that, when every one knows he was on his way back to this village when he was arrested? He is the victim of a plot," Alice continued rapidly,

eagerly. "His enemies are trying to crush him. Oh! father, he is not guilty; I know he is not!"

Brackett sighed deeply.

"You speak strongly, Alice."

"I feel strongly."

"Let us understand each other, my child. Do not hesitate to confide in me. I am your father, and your secrets are sacred to me. Your happiness, too, is inexpressibly dear to me. Tell me frankly, Alice, how deep is your attachment to Lawrence?"

The girl was silent, and her hand trembled upon his shoulder.

"I am waiting, my child."

"I think you know already; do not ask me to speak!" she murmured.

Abram Brackett was himself silent then. A deeper shadow settled upon his face, but it was that of profound sorrow, not anger. He had the truth at last, and it was a severe blow. Alice misunderstood him and raised her head quickly.

"You are angry!" she tremulously exclaimed.

"Not angry, Alice, but grieved—deeply grieved."

"You do Mr. Lawrence wrong by suspecting him. He is noble and good. I know he is!"

"For your sake I hope so, but I doubt it."

"You will not turn against him because he is unfortunate?"

"I think you know me better—"

"I do, father; I do! You are too just and merciful for that."

"He shall be judged fairly; of that you can rest assured. But, Alice, I wish you would forget him."

"I cannot!" she whispered.

"Suppose that he is proved guilty by evidence which even you cannot doubt?"

"He will will not be; he is innocent!"

The judge made a despairing gesture. Twenty years of legal experience had not shown him how to convince a woman with the trustful heart of a child.

"Father," Alice resumed, "promise me one thing!"

"What is that?"

"That he shall have a fair trial. I do not doubt your fairness, but how is he to have his case properly presented? He is without money, and almost without friends. Who will present his case? Who will gather evidence for him? There is no one unless you see to it. Promise that you will do so!"

The Iron Judge was silent for a moment. He had felt bitterly toward Hubert Lawrence; had believed that it would be a pleasure to him to see the actor overwhelmed with adverse evidence; but he was not proof against the force brought to bear upon him. Alice's arms were around his neck, and in that loving embrace the iron of his nature melted away.

"It shall be so," he finally replied. "The ablest of our three lawyers is Edmund Stanley; he shall defend the prisoner, and when he undertakes a case, no stone is left unturned. If Lawrence can be acquitted, Stanley will accomplish it."

It was a great sacrifice on his part, and one which cost him pain, but, though his judgment reproached him, his reward was great. Alice's heart was full of gratitude, and she did not make chary acknowledgment of it. With words, caresses and kisses she gave her thanks, and for awhile the judge's heavy heart was lighter.

When she had left him he shook his head gravely.

"Were I twenty years older I should say that my mind was weakening. What if Lawrence is cleared? I am not sure that the evidence against him is strong, for even Sheriff White admitted that Lawrence was returning to Jack's Delight when arrested. Suppose he is acquitted? He will go free, and have the liberty of the same town where Alice lives. Am I planning to let loose a viper who will involve me, and all I love, in destruction?"

With bent head and frowning brows the judge paced the room. How easily he could deal with the case if Alice were not concerned in it; how difficult it was now!

"And then there is Nathan Bradley and his secret. What of him? He is a knave by his own confession, and a dangerous one, too. Let him beware! There is no one dear to me who will try to shield him, and he had better not press me too far. If he persists, he must be crushed!"

The bent head was raised; the large, dark eyes flashed; the Iron Judge was himself again.

"I do not know," he slowly uttered, "of a man less likely to be Mayor of Jack's Delight than Nathan Bradley!"

A call to supper interrupted him. He and Mrs. Brackett were the only ones at the table that night. Before she left him Alice had expressed an unwillingness to encounter other eyes, and she remained in her room in charge of faithful Electa Parsons.

Two hours later Judge Brackett was called away. News came that there was trouble at the Yellow Jacket Mine, a place ten miles away, and that he was wanted as an arbitrator. This was a position he often filled. If two men, or two bodies of men, had a difficulty, it was always referred to him. His honor, ability and

judgment were beyond question; he was nearly always selected; and he did the work carefully and patiently.

On this occasion he would greatly have preferred to avoid going away, but the case was serious, threatening violence on the part of the dissatisfied men, and he did not refuse.

He ordered his carriage and was driven away by his man—who, by the way, was not Mrs. Brackett's uniformed statue. She had the exclusive use of her famous outfit.

Before his departure, the judge had gone to Alice's room to bid her good-by. The event made little impression upon her mind—she had the belief that every one respected her father too much to do him harm—but thoughts of Garry Kean made her melancholy.

"Miss Alice," pronounced Electa Parsons, in her usual abrupt, masculine way, "you are in the dumps!"

"Am I?"

"You be; I kin see it plainly. You should brace up. The world is but a vale o' woe, an' we should git used ter trouble, an' laugh at it. I do!"

"Ah! but you have no trouble, have you, Electa?"

"Not now, but I've seen my share," was the grim response. "What was the trouble? 'Twas a diffikilty o' the heart. What caused it? A man! What causes all troubles? Man, perfidious man! Men! Hum! I know 'em! You can't tell me anything about 'em. They are like the wild beasts we read about, that go forth ter seek whom they may devour an' eat up!"

This was a severe arraignment, and one calculated to make a member of the male sex blush for his kind, but it was a fact that Electa's "bark was worse than her bite." She was by no means the severe man-hater she assumed to be. If she had ever had her affections blighted, the blight had not been serious. She had good will toward men, as well as toward women, but aspiring to be a practical woman, she felt it necessary to bring all classes to the bar of justice, now and then, and pronounce sentence upon the members thereof.

"Electa, I am nervous to-night," Alice added.

"Nerves, no one should have. They are a superfluity, an' superfluities are an abomination!"

"What shall I do?"

"You might take some valerian, but I can't recommend it, an' we ain't got none."

"Suppose we call upon Mrs. Townley?"

"It's most nine o'clock."

"But the night is pleasant, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And not very dark?"

"Not very."

"Then let us go."

"Your orders is my law. A good soldier always obeys an' never looks behind him. Lot's wife was a poor soldier. She looked back, an' you know what came on't. Orders is the rule o' my life. I obey, an' nobody kin say I don't!"

Miss Parsons placed her arms akimbo, tipped her head to one side, and mutely defied any one to prove that she had ever been lacking in obedience.

"Please fill a basket, and let us get ready as soon as possible."

The idea was not new. Alice had always been noted for her charities, and in that occupation she found one of her principal sources of pleasure. Her blindness shut out one-half of the world from her, compelling her to forego many of the amusements common to those of her age, but the ability to practice charity remained, as the poor and unfortunate were well aware.

Electa always accompanied her on her visits, and a more capable person could not have been found. Electa was a stout obstacle in the way of impostors. Often Alice would have been deceived, and led to give to greedy swindlers, but her assistant was not to be misled.

Electa had eyes; she used them; and, despite her eccentricities, she had such good judgment that no impostor could impose upon her.

As a result, when Alice gave, she gave wisely.

The Mrs. Townley before mentioned was the wife of a miner who was confined to his bed with a broken leg. He was not an object of pity, but his wife was. He had been a rough, drunken fellow who never laid by a cent, and was a shining light among the "Reds," she was a patient, long-enduring woman who deserved a better lot. Alice was helping her, but the aid was given so wisely that Job Townley's only benefit from it was in the way of actual necessities—he received nothing to spend foolishly.

The basket was duly prepared by Electa. She put in food and wine, and what she thought necessary, and then returned to Alice. They donned their outer garments and left the house.

Electa's mind was not wholly at ease. She felt that the hour was later than Alice ought to go out, but she remembered the respect universally shown the blind girl, and hoped that no ill consequences would come of the expedition.

CHAPTER X.

ALICE HEARS STARTLING NEWS.

JOB TOWNLEY was in a bad way, and going dead back on his Christian name. His broken leg

had taken an unfavorable turn and was giving him considerable pain. This trouble he did not endure with the amiable patience of that Job to memory dear. Job Townley cast patience to the four winds and raved angrily. He commenced by compelling his wife to attend to him closely, and abusing her for all she did; then finally drove her out of the room, with the threat that if she came back he would beat her.

She was sitting in another room when Alice and Electa called. One of Job's boon companions had just been in, and she supposed that would be the last, but the coming of her good Samaritans pleased her none the less. The contents of the basket was very welcome, too, and the good woman gave suitable thanks.

Alice questioned her, as usual, in regard to her husband. She answered frankly, but in a peculiar way which did not escape the girl's attention.

"You are worried about your husband," Alice observed.

"Oh! not particularly. The doctor says the new trouble is the result of his restlessness, and that he is doing very well."

"I thought by your voice that you seemed to be in trouble."

"Not about that," was the hesitating reply.

"Something new," Electa suggested.

"Yes."

"Out with it, marm; we are mother confessors," grimly declared Mrs. Parsons.

"I am worried—frightened," Mrs. Townley confessed.

"About what?"

"I don't know that I ought to tell. Yes; I know I ought to tell, but I'm afraid to."

Her manner did not belie the last statement. She appeared to be nervous and frightened.

"My advice is, speak right out," answered Electa.

"Was the young man they call Garry Kean arrested to-day?" was the slow inquiry.

Electa looked quickly toward Alice.

"Yes," she briefly replied.

"Have you heard any talk against him?"

"Not much."

Mrs. Townley was silent.

"What hev you heard?" demanded Electa.

"One of my husband's friends called a little while ago, and I heard part of their talk, unknown to them. They spoke of Garry Kean, and I am afraid—" a long pause, "that he is in danger!"

"In danger," echoed Alice. "What kind of danger?"

"From the lynchers!"

The words were uttered in a frightened way, but Mrs. Townley did not know the effect they would have. She had never heard of any acquaintance between the young actor and Alice, and supposed that she was referring to that which was only of common interest. Electa glanced quickly toward Alice again, and the swift rush of color from the girl's cheeks alarmed her.

"Nonsense!" cried Miss Parsons, with energy.

"The man said so, anyhow."

"I reckon this town ain't such a place."

"I only know what I heard."

"Tell me just what it was!"

The last direction was from Alice. She had been making a strong effort to control herself, and her success was such that Mrs. Townley still remained unconscious of the dismay she had caused.

"What I heard," was the reply, "was this: Ben Soper told my husband it was a pity he was not able to get out of doors, for the 'boys' were going to have some 'fun' to-night. Job asked what it was. Ben answered that Garry Kean had turned horse-thief, was under arrest, and that the people were so wild over the crime that they were going to visit the jail in a body and lynch Kean!"

"Was Ben Soper drunk?" harshly asked Electa.

"He was wholly sober."

"Was he crazy?"

"Certainly not."

"Then he must 'a' been 'a fool!' declared Electa, severely.

"Why do you say that?"

"The idee of lynchers in this town is ridiculous."

"I am afraid—terribly afraid—he told the truth. He lowered his voice confidentially, and I heard but little—no particulars whatever—but I haven't a doubt that a plan has been laid to visit the jail, take Garry Kean away from the guard, and lynch him. Dear, deary me! I'm in a panic!"

Alice Brackett abruptly rose.

"We must go now," she announced. "Come, Electa!"

Her voice was calm, but Electa felt that the composure was unnatural. That sagacious woman knew that a plan had been formed by Alice, and that it pointed to the saving of Garry Kean from the lynchers. Electa was dismayed. She was willing to risk a good deal to save an innocent man, but for Alice to again figure in Kean's case was more than Abram Brackett was likely to endure patiently. In what had gone before Miss Parsons had, in a measure, been a confederate, but she had found the judge unex-

pectedly merciful. He would not be so, she believed, a second time.

Their parting with Mrs. Townley was somewhat unceremonious, and the door had no sooner closed than Alice exclaimed:

"Take me to Sheriff White's!"

"Oh! Miss Alice, surely you won't—"

"His life is in peril! Did you hear that?"

"Yes, but—"

"No more, Electa! We should be doing wrong to ignore his danger, even though he were the worst of men. As it is—Electa, say no more; take me to the sheriff's!"

There was an unusual firmness to her manner, recalling the Iron Judge, himself, and Electa gave way. Anyhow, they had only to warn White, and the matter would soon be settled. Possibly, no one but the sheriff would ever know of their call.

Arm-in-arm they moved quickly through the dark street. Reaching White's house, they knocked and were soon admitted to his presence. He looked greatly surprised, but did not fail to pay due respect to Miss Brackett. Then the whole story was rapidly told him.

He looked incredulous.

"I have heard nothing about it," he remarked.

"Do you suppose the men would come and tell you their intentions?" Alice demanded.

"I am usually around about town, and there is but little going on that I don't know," Mr. White asserted, with considerable dignity.

"Surely, you don't doubt the report?"

"But I do. Ben Soper is a notorious liar, and he was telling a prize yarn to make Job Townley feel good. The idea of lynchers here—in a place where I am sheriff—is absurd."

"So I said," coincided Miss Parsons.

"Electa, will you be silent?"

Never before had her young mistress spoken so severely to her, and the maiden lady at once became a trifle sulky.

"At least, sir," Alice added, "you will place such a guard over the jail that Mr. Lawrence will be safe."

"I have two good men there, already."

"Two men! Do you suppose they could resist a mob?" Alice indignantly demanded.

"One of them could run up here and tell me."

"And what would the rioters be doing in the meanwhile?"

"My dear young lady, there will be no riot!"

"Do you intend to proceed upon that theory?"

"Such is my idea."

"Mr. White, are you sheriff of this place, and thus trifle with human life?"

It was a vehement outburst, full of spirit and indignation, and the pallor in Alice's cheeks had given place to the flush of anger. She looked exceedingly pretty, but more than that was revealed. Those who had thought her so gentle and retiring might well be surprised at her spirit, but it was plain that she had some of her father's strong will back of her amiable exterior.

"Lord bless me!" the sheriff answered, "I have no notion of trifling with anybody's life, but I am not to be frightened by a shadow."

"Is it, or is it not, your duty to keep the peace when you learn that threats of violence have been made?"

"Zounds! you ought to be a lawyer, Miss Brackett!"

"Sir, will you answer me?"

"Miss Brackett, I beg that you will not be offended, but you do not understand business affairs. I have been sheriff, in this and other counties, for many years, and I never have made a mistake yet. Having been so long an officer, I bring both instinct and judgment to my aid; I read the public like a book—ask Judge Brackett if I ever fail in my duty."

"In one word, sir, do you refuse to strengthen the guard at the jail?"

"I must."

"And you will take no precautions—"

"Sufficient precautions are already made."

The sheriff spoke curtly. The pretty daughter of the eminent judge was not a person to be ignored, but White had views of his own, and one was that an old sheriff ought not to be told his duty by any woman; certainly not by a mere girl. He had grown weary of the discussion, and spoke with considerable sharpness.

Alice at once arose.

"Take me away, Electa!" she directed.

She moved toward the door.

"I hope you are not offended," observed White.

"And I hope you will not have the death of a fellow-man registered against you!"

The earnest, solemn reply gave the sheriff an unpleasant feeling, and when he had recovered his wits, Alice and Electa were gone from the house. They went several yards in silence, and then Alice suddenly paused.

"Where are you leading me?" she asked.

"Home."

"I'm not going there!"

"Not goin' home?"

"No."

"Where are you goin', then?"

"Heaven help me! I don't know. We would ride to the mine and warn my father, but it might be too late. What are we to do, Electa?"

"Ain't you done all you can, miss?" asked Electa, sorely troubled. "You've told the sheriff. Come! let's go home!"

"Not until Hubert Lawrence is safe!"

"But what can you do?"

"True—what can I do?"

The girl pressed both hands to her brows. There was a deep, quick throbbing there, and the veins seemed dangerously filled with the life-fluid. She was greatly excited, and her own helplessness, beset as she was with blindness, was pitiful.

"Miss Alice, pray don't think hard of me, but I doubt—"

"I have it!" cried the girl, with a sudden start. "English John! I didn't think of him before."

"What o' him?"

"He is just the man for the place. He is thoroughly devoted to Hubert, and he will leave no stone unturned to save him. We will go to English John at once!"

"But he lives over in the rough part o' the town, an'—"

"Never mind! Lead on!"

"Miss Alice, remember the Reds! It is dangerous—"

"Electa, there is a watchful Providence which has us in its keeping; I trust in that. Lead on!"

"I'll do as ye say, but may the Lord forgive me if I do wrong."

The faithful attendant spoke in deep perturbation. Masculine as she was in her ways, she would never have ventured to that part of the town where English John lived under less pressing circumstances. There was the dwelling-place of the "Reds," and fights were common occurrences. "Shanty-town," it was called, and only for Shanty-town, Ambrose White would have had but few men to arrest.

Heavy, indeed, was Electa's heart as they walked on, but all her fears were for Alice. As far as she was personally concerned, she knew very little about fear, and if they were molested, the enemy would find that worthy Miss Parsons could strike equally well with tongue or hand.

In her opinion one thing was sure to follow the mad venture. Abram Brackett would hear of it, and he would lose no time in decapitating Miss Electa Parsons's official head. He surely would not forgive her for leading his daughter to Shanty-town, and in a short time she would be free to look for other fields of usefulness.

This idea flitted through her mind, but had no permanent lodging there. Alice and her peril demanded all the faithful guardian's time, and the latter kept close watch as they penetrated further and further into the lair of the Reds.

Shanty-town and darkness closed around them.

CHAPTER XI.

TO SAVE GARRY KEAN'S LIFE!

"At last!"

Alice breathed the words with a sigh of relief when Electa announced that they were at English John's door. The dangers of Shanty-town had thus far been successfully met, though the adventuresome couple had several times nearly run upon wandering parties of Reds. Luckily, they did not have to make any inquiries. English John was well known, and his patriotism in hoisting an American flag over his shanty had made that building equally famous.

Electa's knock was followed by his voice, bluffly bidding them enter. They obeyed, but he looked amazed when he saw who was there. Never since he flung the Star-Spangled Banner to the breeze had he had such company before.

He rose to his feet and blankly muttered:

"By St. George!"

He was given but little time to satisfy his surprise. Once sure that he was found, Alice began and poured out her story rapidly, excitedly, yet coherently. She had no need to ask English John if he would act in the case; she knew she could depend upon him; and her only thought was to tell the story as soon as possible.

The big miner did not interrupt. He listened; he drank in every word; and the play of his features was an answer in itself. Surprise, indignation, alarm and anger were there expressed, and his nervously-working hands instinctively sought his weapons.

He was like a warrior roused to action.

When all was told he brought his hands forcibly together.

"It's the work o' Nate Bradley!" he exclaimed.

"How do you know?" Alice asked.

Her lack of sight caused her to lose the peculiar expression which crossed John's face, and his reply revealed but little.

"Wal, he's mean enough for it, an' he's the leader o' the Reds."

"Can't you do something, sir—"

"Can't I? Wal, I should remark! I kin knock the stuffin' out o' the man who waltzes up ter the jail with lawless thoughts in his mind."

"You cannot drive them off alone."

"Shan't try. Nate Bradley is a double-barreled gun among the Reds, but I thank good-

ness, all the folks at Jack's Delight ain't toughs an' Reds. I kin git a dozen honest miners tergeth in ten minutes; men who know weepens as they do the picks they wield up in the gulches; an' they've got the sand nec'sary ter face the enemy, you bet!"

"May Heaven bless you, and your undertaking!" Alice murmured, tremulously.

"I wouldn't ask for a prayer from better sources. Ef the Master o' Life don't heed you, He wouldn't heed nobody. Rest easy, little woman; Garry Kean shall be saved. It can't be done with idle talk, though. Go you home, ladies, an' I'll gather my battle-pards!"

The sturdy miner had been making preparations while he spoke, and was ready for action. Threatening as the situation was, he did not forget to bow his visitors out with grace worthy of a Macready, a Kean, or a Garrick, but once outside he left them to care for themselves. It did not then occur to him that they had a dangerous road along which to retrace their steps, and his forgetfulness was, perhaps, excusable, for Garry's danger had stirred him up more than he was willing to reveal.

He hurried away.

Alice breathed a sigh of relief, but Electa prudently reserved her demonstration in that line until such time as they had passed the purlieus of Shanty-town.

They lost no time in commencing the retreat. Electa had considered themselves very fortunate in having reached English John's shanty without encountering any one, and so they were. Usually the journey could not have been made without running upon wandering Reds. There was only one practical way of accounting for their good luck, and that was, that the roughs were busy with plans for their contemplated riot.

Despite the good woman's fear, good luck did not desert them then. With quick steps they threaded the devious paths among the huts, and Shanty-town was safely left behind.

Then Electa uttered her postponed sigh of relief.

"Where are we now?" Alice asked.

"Near Nugget Hill."

"I thought so. We will go to its top."

"Go where?"

"To the top of the hill."

"Land o' love! What for?"

"To see the result of the riot."

"Oh, Miss Alice, you don't mean it—you can't mean it!"

"Why not?"

"Do you know what time it is?"

"The hour is growing late—"

"Yes, an' you ought ter be at home. What would the judge say?"

"I trust that my good father would say that human life is sacred. My kind friend, do not oppose me in this. I cannot go home and rest easy with this suspense upon me. The rioters will attack the jail, and English John and his friends will try to do what Sheriff White has criminally refused to do. There will be fighting; Hubert Lawrence will be in danger; I must know the result!"

Alice spoke with feverish rapidity, showing what a nervous condition she was in, and Electa uttered a dolorous sound which no spirit of gallantry to her sex could lead to its classification as anything but a groan.

"My poor lamb!" she added, dismally

"Why do you say that?"

"Miss Alice, you hev done your duty; you hev been a heroine who puts Joan Dorsey, Zenoby an'—an' the rest o' them women—ter the blush. Be satisfied now; go home; an' trust the rest ter the good Lord who watches over us feeble mortal critters. Nugget Hill ain't a safe place fur you; it is wild, rocky, dark and lonesome."

"Electa, there will be dangerous men nowhere but at the jail to-night. I have no fear; lead me to the top of the hill!"

Miss Parsons groaned again; but—yielded. She knew the folly of remonstrance. The Brackett will was aroused, and in that restless current Electa was as helpless as a floating cork. She really had less fear of Nugget Hill than her words indicated, but she knew that Alice ought to be at home, and was well aware that if Abram Brackett knew of the affair there would be a storm.

Carefully guiding her companion's steps, she led the way to the top of the hill. It was not high, but a fine view of the whole town was to be had, and it was admirably suited to their purpose.

They waited and watched. Minutes passed. The interval seemed almost a generation to Electa, but, in point of fact, just about an hour had elapsed when the first sign came from the quarter of interest.

It was sudden in the extreme. Possibly there had been conversation at the jail; a demand for the surrender of the Man with Backbone, and a refusal; but none of these things were heard by the watchers, nor did they see anything until a single shot sounded plainly.

Alice gave a nervous start.

"They're at it!" muttered Electa.

"Is it at the jail?"

"Yes; I seen the flash."

They were interrupted. Another shot sounded, and, close after it, an irregular volley.

"May Heaven protect him!" Alice breathed.

Electa had been arousing like the "Joan Dorsey" she had mentioned. There was a good deal of martial spirit in Electa's nature, and though she might not shine in history like Joan of Arc, she could not see such a scene unmoved.

"It's a reg'lar battle o' Waterwool!" she declared.

"What do you see, Electa?"

"What do I see? I see the flash of fire-arms; I see what looks like like a hundred big fire-bugs. Now they flame up; now they go out. It's excitin'—it is, I vum! I've always wanted ter see a battle, an' they're at it. See the report o' the guns!—no; I mean, hear the reports!"

"Have they really attacked the jail?"

"They hev, sure as you live!"

Alice stood with clasped hands. She trembled with excitement; a great fear was upon her; the suspense was painful beyond expression; and she would have given all for the power of sight.

"What are they doing? Tell me all that you see!"

"The red tide o' battle is on!" proclaimed Electa, flourishing both arms. "The thunders o' big guns is heard, an' the 'arth quakes with fear! There is wars an' rumors o' wars, an' the ocean is upheaved, an' brother is pitted ag'in' brother, but the lamb don't lay down with the lion!"

"Use no idle terms, Electa. Tell me what you really see!"

"The battle is at the gate o' the jail. The mob has charged, but they've run up ag'in' somethin'. They're havin' a desprit' time. English John is there! I vum! I like that man! He reminds me o' the crusaders who fit in the Holy War in Afrikay. The Reds hev met their match. Oh! don't I wish I's a man!"

Wildly the speaker swung her arms, as though to beat down some daring foe. She had not a word to say then about leaving Nugget Hill.

"But who is winning the battle?" anxiously demanded Alice.

"English John an' his warriors stands like the rock o' Gibbyraltar. The Reds fight like sin, but I don't see as they gain a foot. English John is there! You don't hear so much shootin' now. I reckon it is hand-ter-hand, as Hermanirus, Specious Lartius an' them other Romans defended the bridge over the fiber. I ain't a-bettin' man, or I'd take a resk o' five dollars that the Reds gits left!"

"The firing has stopped. What does it mean? What—"

"It means vict'ry! Hurrah fur the 'Merican eagle an' English John! The battle is over. There is no more sounds o' shootin', no red flashes, no yells, no strugglin' at the gates! I sha'n't forgit this night ef I live ter be as old as Job—I mean Methuselah. The riot is deader'n a door-nail, by sixty!"

"Oh! Electa, are you sure?"

"Ain't got an artom o' doubt."

"Thank Heaven!"

The broken exclamation was so fraught with emotion that Electa was suddenly recalled to practical life. She forgot her aspirations to be a warrior, and, turning, caught Alice in her strong arms.

"My poor lamb!" she exclaimed, "forgive me fur bein' so thoughtless. You are all wrought up. You are nervous an' beat out, completely."

"But happy!" murmured the girl.

"You may wal be, fur Garry Kean is saved. Now le's go home!"

She spoke anxiously, once more remembering their position, and Alice did not object. They turned and left the top of Nugget Hill.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN WITH BACKBONE GIVES NOTICE.

THE people of Jack's Delight had something to talk about the following day. They had something to see, also, and a sensation was caused by the sight of Garry Kean walking calmly through the streets.

The story ran in this way:

A body of roughs had attacked the jail with the intention of lynching the Man with Backbone. They would have succeeded, only for a lucky chance. The feeble guard could never have checked them, but in some way English John, the miner, had gained news of their project, and had secretly gathered a few hardy, honest men to meet them.

A fight had followed in which the rioters were signally worsted, and they had gone off with decimated numbers, humbled and frightened.

Among the fallen was found Aaron Barney, the owner of the horse alleged to have been stolen by the prisoner. Barney was fatally wounded, and lived only a short time after he was picked up by the victors; but before he died, he made a statement which put matters on a radically new footing.

He confessed that the charge against Garry Kean was false in every particular. He declared that Kean had hired the team of him in the regular way, but that he had immediately been approached by men who paid him to make a false charge of horse-stealing against the young man.

According to his knowledge and belief the actor had fully intended to return; there had never been reason to think otherwise; and the charge was without the least foundation.

On being asked the names of the men who had bribed him, he attempted to reply, but the names were never revealed. He was within the grasp of Death, and he succumbed with the secret in part untold.

All this was unfortunate, but he had told enough to help Garry Kean. Sheriff White, aroused at last, had arrived in time to hear the confession, and as he was somewhat alarmed by the possibility that he might be brought to judgment for refusing to strengthen the guard, when notified of the danger, he tried to even up on his record by releasing Kean promptly.

Without stopping to consider whether or not Judge Brackett would desire to sit on the case, he opened the jail doors, gave Garry an apology and his blessing, and the young actor was again free to go and come at his pleasure.

One question was often asked, but never answered: Who had given warning to the defenders?

Those who could answer, would not. English John was silent for Alice's sake; Ambrose White was silent for his own sake. He was willing to let the matter die out if it would.

Only among the Reds was there an overpowering desire to know how they had been outwitted. They looked for a traitor, but did not find him.

The Brackett family did not come prominently to the front that day. The judge visited the coroner, suggested to that official that he do his work promptly, dropped a hint that the department of justice would follow after—and then went back home.

Had Alice told him of her share in the night's work?

Sheriff White asked the question mentally, dreading the wrath of his superior. He had neglected his duty, and if the Brackett temper became aroused, there would be music for the sheriff of the city.

Garry Kean asked the question, too. English John, close-mouthed as he was when with others, told his young friend all he knew, and great was Garry's curiosity to know the state of affairs in the Brackett house. Had Alice kept her secret from her father? Or had she revealed all, fallen under his displeasure, and been made a practical prisoner there? Whatever the facts were, they did not leak out. Alice was not visible. The judge, as before stated, appeared only to disappear soon after.

The house kept its secrets well.

One of the favorite resorts of Jack's Delight was what was called "The Sporting Arena." It was not the best place in the world, but good management saved it from being very bad. There were several small and three large rooms under one roof. Of the latter, one was a so-called "theater," where boxing and wrestling were to be seen on a stage during the evening; the second was a bar-room; and the third was an apartment which contained several billiard-tables, a bowling-alley, a shooting-gallery and a quantity of chairs.

The place was prosperous; it was well patronized; and it really rose above the level of the ordinary saloon. Nearly all of the best men of the town were seen there, at times, and they felt none the worse for it.

On the afternoon of the day following the attack upon the jail about twenty men were in the main room, and among them were Nathan Bradley and Thad Johnson.

The two persons last named were not in their usual good spirits. Sitting somewhat apart from the rest, they had indulged in a long, earnest conversation, and their expressions showed that they found but little pleasure in it. On the contrary, they looked glum and angry.

In the midst of their discussion Bradley suddenly became aware that a man was standing within a few feet of them, regarding them closely.

He looked up with a start and saw Garry Kean.

The latter's personal appearance had changed. He had discarded his white shirt for one of blue flannel, and his derby hat for one of true Western style; and around his waist was a belt which contained a pair of revolvers.

The metamorphosis was complete and striking. It had a meaning, and the meaning was plain—the quiet citizen was turned to a man who, realizing that he had enemies, intended thereafter to meet them on their own ground.

Bradley did not see fit to be instructed by appearances, and his lip curled in a scornful sneer.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, "the tenderfoot has turned into some other sort of a biped!"

"It's a clown, this time," added Thad Johnson. "Reckon he's goin' on the stage ag'in."

Garry Kean advanced a few steps nearer.

"Gentlemen," he very quietly returned, "you have hit the nail on the head. I am going on the stage."

"Not as a stage-robber?" inquired Bradley, with ill-tempered sarcasm.

"Guess again, sir!"

"Can't be a *driver* of a stage, for you have shown that handling a team is not your forte."

"Your wit is admirable, sir; but your wits are slow. I am going to branch out as a hunter, and my game will be human game!"

Thad Johnson laughed boisterously.

"Durn me ef it ain't amosin' ter hear a tenderfoot go on!" he asserted. "Ef I didn't hate a fool, I should pity a tenderfoot!"

"Reserve your pity, my good sir," calmly answered Kean. "You may need it for yourself presently."

"For myself?"

"Yes."

Johnson scowled fiercely.

"What d'ye mean?"

"Great men often meet with ill luck. Napoleon did, and the run of the cards has not changed since his day. Even you, Mr. Johnson, may be struck by lightning."

"Ef I be, thar'll be enough on me left ter thrash any tenderfoot in Idaho!"

"You please me, sir. I am an admirer of courage, especially when it is accompanied with high intellect, as in your case; and I appreciate your sanguinary taste all the more, because I am contemplating going on the war-path, myself."

Thad was ready with another sneer, but Nathan spoke impatiently:

"We don't care a continental what you intend to do."

"Of course I realize that, but as you are one of the most eminent citizens of this city, I crave permission to lay my case before you. You know something about my history. I came here a quiet, peaceable man, with good will to all and a disposition to mind my own business."

"Pity you changed your mind!" sneered Bradley, but the interruption was ignored.

"I unexpectedly had occasion to defend a lady, and was, as a consequence, wounded by a ruffian. After a time in bed, I got around again, and then another ruffian charged me with having been a black-mailer in the former case. I chastised that man, as any honest person of spirit would do."

"Hum!" muttered Thad Johnson, puffing out his whisky-blotched cheeks.

"In these, and other ways, I gained the ill will of certain men, and a scheme was concocted to make me out a horse-thief. It fell through, but it impressed one fact indelibly upon my mind. It was this: I had deadly enemies in town; men who were determined to crush me; who would scruple at nothing; who would not let a peaceable citizen alone; who would ruin me if they could; who would probably kill me, if they couldn't ruin me!"

The Man with Backbone was growing interested in his statement. He drew his fine form more erect; his eyes sparkled; and his voice had a tense, ringing sound not to be misunderstood.

"What is all this to us?" demanded Bradley.

"Perhaps nothing; possibly much. If you are good citizens, you must appreciate my position. The situation is this: From this time out I am going to be more than a drifting log on the current. My enemies have given me one blow; it may not be the last. I hope it will not!"

"Who are these enemies you talk so much about?"

"Rattlesnakes that aspire to strike me with their fangs, and, at the same time, keep in their holes."

"That is not giving names."

"Deeds, not names, count. I have seen their deeds; they shall see mine, if they jump on me again. You will observe"—touching his belt—"that I have provided myself with the means of self-defense. Heretofore I have always desired to avoid trouble; now I invite it. I wish to hear from my enemies again!"

His keen eyes looked unwaveringly at Nathan Bradley, and that worthy appeared to be discomposed.

"If you are spoiling for a fight, why don't you go to them?" he asked, curtly.

"Possibly I shall, presently. I may yet assume the offensive. Just now, however, I am awaiting their pleasure. I intend to serve notice upon them that I am ready—let them attack me if they dare!"

His manner grew more impressive, but it was not that of a bully or a boaster. His voice was not raised high, nor did his quiet demeanor forsake him, but through all ran a vein of implacable determination.

"Do you know these enemies?" asked Bradley.

"I am pretty well informed."

"What is their grudge against you?"

"They and I know well what it is."

"How do you propose to act?"

"I have before compared them to rattlesnakes. I will now add that the best way to subdue such a reptile is to crush its head!"

"See hyar, mister," suggested Thad Johnson, "ain't you an artom keerless ter give away yer plan? S'pose these inemies o' yours should hear o' yer intentions?"

"That is just what I desire, and I passed much of the forenoon debating the advisability of going to these enemies and speaking right out to them. I decided to act openly; to say to each and all that if they wanted to carry the game further, I was all ready."

"Have you seen any of them, yet?" Bradley inquired.

"Two!"

"What did they say to your challenge?"

"I am waiting for them to answer!"

The reply was significant, and Bradley and Thad exchanged glances. They knew perfectly well that all this talk was intended for them; that Garry Kean was informing them to their faces that he defied them—challenging them to renew hostilities. His suspicions were not groundless, and the opportunity was offered for them to strike openly, as they had before struck secretly; but they did not accept the invitation. They were two men—he was but one; yet not a hostile hand was lifted against him.

As they were influenced by nothing except a consideration for their own safety, it was but fair to infer that they discerned more "sand" about the Man with Backbone than they were able to match.

"And," added Garry, after a striking pause, "I hope they will not be backward about putting in their answer. I hate a coward!"

CHAPTER XIII.

GARRY MEETS A REDOUTABLE BRAVO.

NATHAN BRADLEY felt uncomfortable, but he managed to rally.

"I appreciate your situation, Kean," he blandly observed, "and if I can help you, I will. I am, as you are probably aware, a prominent man in this city. The chances are that I shall be its next mayor. I have a large following here; about half of the population stand ready to obey me in all this. If your enemies can be spotted, my followers shall make it warm for them. I do not jest, Mr. Kean, when I say that if I request my worthy constituents to drop on any certain man, that man disappears forever!"

The speaker was taking his turn at significant remarks.

"Do you never find a man selected for doom who defies you?" calmly inquired Garry.

"Often. These men, however, never have a gravestone to sleep under; I bury them cheaply."

"This is amusing. You must enjoy yourself to have matters all your own way. However, you may yet run up against a snag. It would not surprise me if you do. Your friendly offer will not be forgotten, and you may hear from me again. Having mentioned it, I shall know how to deal with your heroes. As for my enemies, they are cowards who strike in the dark."

Nathan moved uneasily.

"Let me hear from you, if they molest you again," he advised.

"You shall!"

Slowly and pointedly the reply was made, and the force of enduring such suggestive shots became too much for Nathan to bear. He arose abruptly.

"I shall have to excuse myself now, Kean, for I have business to attend to, but you shall hear from me again!"

"Come around whenever you will; you will find me ready!" Garry responded, promptly.

"Well, good-day, sir!"

"Good-day. I am glad to know you so well!"

Even the last remark was a covert shot, but it, like all that had gone before, was ignored. Bradley bowed ceremoniously, and then he walked out of the room. Thad Johnson followed. That ill-favored ruffian hardly knew how to act. He felt like rising in his wrath, and in his boots, and chastising the "tenderfoot" then and there, but something in the latter's manner made him hesitate. Noisy brag that Johnson usually was, he decided that, as Nathan was his acknowledged leader, he would await Nathan's word before proceeding to annihilate the tenderfoot.

Despite this, Thad was in an ugly mood, and as they left the building he vented his spite by kicking a Chinaman who happened to be at hand.

Once out of sight, Bradley wheeled quickly.

"Thad, the danger-light is out!" he exclaimed.

"How so, Cap?"

"Garry Kean is on to my racket."

"Does look like it, by blazes!"

"He's on, sure!"

"Knows that you planned the 'tack on the jail, I s'pose."

"No doubt, and I have some fear that he suspects the primary cause of my hostility to him."

"What ef he tells Judge Brackett?"

"Hang the judge! I have him under my thumb. Let us speak only of this scoundrel who has just bluffed us into silence. Malediction seize him! he somehow took my nerve away! Let us speak of Garry Kean. Thad, that fellow must die!"

"Say the word, an' I'll pop him over now!"

"Fool! You reason and act like an animal! The deed would ruin us both. Soft and easy, is the only way. We will strike him again, and this time not by any clumsy plot like the other. We will catch him outside the village, and do him up."

"Carrot!"

"Mind now, not a word of this. Garry Kean dies, but there must be no tattling."

"I ketch on."

"Come away for now."

In the mean while, Garry had taken a seat at the further side of the room. His conversation with Bradley had been carried on so quietly that no one of the other persons present had suspected that ill-feeling marked it, and only casual attention was given him when he was alone.

Something out of the ordinary course of events soon occurred, however.

A slight sound in the "theater" attracted Garry's notice, and as he had reached a stage of affairs when he could not afford to let anything go uninvestigated, he looked around. He was just in time to see some object whiz through the air. The next moment it struck the wall near him and dropped to the floor.

There it lay, a ferocious bowie-knife with a scrap of paper tied to the hilt.

An attempt had evidently been made to pierce the wall with the blade, but it had been so clumsily done that all the romance was stripped away. The weapon was an ugly-looking one, but no old hand had flung it.

It acted just as effectually upon Garry, however. The moment he comprehended the situation, he reached down and caught up the knife. Another instant, and he had darted into the theater in search of the knife-thrower.

As he passed the door he had a transient view of some one on the stage, but in a moment more the unknown was gone. His coat-tails fluttered for a brief space at the wings, and then he was "off the stage."

Garry, however, had no intention of letting the matter drop there. He had not taken time to read the message tied to the knife, but he was determined to know who had so dramatically delivered it. He sprung upon the stage and darted after the runaway at full speed.

The alleged theater was somewhat crudely arranged, but it was enough like the real article to make Kean feel pretty well at home. Feeling sure that the runaway would make for the outside door, he made a great rush to head him off before that point was reached.

Luck favored him.

A short flight of steps lay in the way, and as he reached the top he saw the unknown sprawling at the bottom, the victim of a misstep. Garry went down like a shot, and was just in time to seize the other man as he scrambled to his feet. He proved to be a slender, puny little fellow, with a pale face and hair almost as colorless; and as the actor's strong grasp was laid upon him, the shock again flung him to the floor.

As he lay sprawling there, Garry, realizing that he had a most insignificant foe, deliberately put his foot upon the little man's breast, in the good old style of story and drama, and held him there while he read the message attached to the wicked-looking bowie.

First of all he saw a skull and pair of crossbones, artistically done, and below the gory sign was a brief article in writing. It looked like the work of a school-girl, with its pretty little curves and flourishes, but the words, if not the letters, were sanguinary. The document was as follows:

"NOTICE!

"We, the undersigned, do hereby give notice to the wretch calling himself Garry Kean, that he must leave Jack's Delight or die! The majesty of the law has been violated; private citizens have been misused; the streets of the city have run red with blood; and all on account of a common actor! We will not tolerate his presence here. He must go! Twenty-four hours are given him in which to get out of town. If he defies the notice, he must die! We have sworn to kill him and feed his body to the buzzards. Be warned in time. Go! We are sworn together by a terrible oath which would make you shudder. Blood! blood! blood! Go, or die! This is our last warning.

"CAPTAIN KIDD,
"ABE BLUEBEARD,
"RAW-BEEF RUBE."

Garry Kean turned his gaze from the ferocious, florid, extravagant "notice" to the weak, trembling, puny little man under his foot, and a smile crossed his face.

"You are a bad boy!" he remarked.

"Don't kill me!" gasped the little man.

"I ought to."

"It—it was only a joke."

"Oh! I don't object to the threat, in itself, but any one who would write such a document as that, ought to be spanked. You overdid the job, sonny. No genuine cut-throat would ever descend to such extravagant terms, while as for the late lamented Captain Kidd, he would blush to own such a document."

"I didn't mean it," protested the little man, who could not get over his fright.

"Then why did you write it?"

"Some men made me."

"Who were they?"

"I don't know. They wore masks, and held big knives at my breast while they made me write."

"Come off the rocks! This was all your own work. Now, why are you in such a passion for me to leave town?"

The prisoner was silent.

"I should dislike to use this weapon on you"—Garry meditatively felt of the keen edge of the

bowie—"but unless you own up, I shall have to pay you in your own coin. 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—'"

He had stooped with the knife held upward, and the little man broke out in terrified accents:

"Don't!—don't! I'll tell all!"

"Out with it!"

"I wanted you to go away and leave Alice Brackett!"

"Oh! that's how the wind blows, is it? You admire Miss Brackett, do you?"

"Yes," groaned the prisoner.

"If I mistake not, you are the son of Mayor Nicholson?"

"Yes, sir; I am. I am Elmer Nicholson, and my father is mayor of this city. If you hurt me he will—"

"Little boy, I don't care a picayune for you or your father. If I saw fit I could have you arrested for throwing this knife at me with malice—"

"Indeed! indeed! I didn't intend to hit you!"

"Get up!"

Garry reached down, grasped the prisoner by the shoulder and set him upon his feet. How the sturdy West ever produced such a feeble specimen was a wonder. He was past his twentieth year, but was short and slender, with very light flaxen hair, and a mustache which was white of color and even more feeble than his body. His pale face was far from intelligent, but there was that in its expression which indicated a certain amount of cunning and a good deal of viciousness.

The Man with Backbone eyed his frightened companion sharply.

"This is a very serious matter!" he observed.

"If you'll let me go, I won't touch you again," young Nicholson pleaded.

"I ought to have you arrested."

"No, no; don't do it. You'll ruin my reputation!"

"Have you one?"

"Sir," answered the prisoner, plucking up some courage, "I am the son of the mayor!"

Garry smiled again.

"Does he know you are out?"

"Out? I don't understand."

"Never mind. I don't see any good reason why we need to quarrel, and it is possible that we can form a truce. If I do not have you arrested, will you let me alone after this?"

"Indeed, I will, sir."

"Then why shouldn't we be friends?"

"I shall be delighted!" asserted Nicholson, but there was a crafty gleam in his eyes which discredited his words.

"As for what you have said about Miss Brackett, you ought not to believe idle rumors you hear. Remember that I only am a poor actor, while she occupies a high social position—one nearly equal to your own."

The delicate flattery pleased the boy immensely, and his courage and conceit came back at a hard gallop.

"I see, I see," he responded. "You are a sensible fellow, Kean. You see, as to Alice, I have serious intentions there. I am of marriageable age, and our position in social life being so nearly equal, I think it would be a good match."

"No one could hold two opinions on that subject."

"Unfortunately," added Elmer, essaying to give his mustache a ferocious pull, and only failing because he could not get a suitable hold, "I have a rival!"

"Who is that?—if I may ask?"

"Nathan Bradley."

"Surely, you ought to have no fear of him."

"Ah! you don't know the hold that evil desperado has upon them."

"What hold can he have?"

Nicholson looked carefully around to make sure they were alone.

"I'll tell you in strict confidence!" he promised.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LETTER WITH A MEANING.

GARRY was interested in his companion, but not one grain of confidence did he put in him. Young Nicholson was, in a certain sense, grateful for the leniency shown him, and for the time he was inclined to be friendly, but this mood would not last long. He was a treacherous little viper who was quite as dangerous, in his underhand way, as a man of muscle.

At least, this was the way Garry analyzed him.

"I shall be glad to hear you," the actor answered.

"There is a secret which concerns old Brackett!" declared Elmer.

"What secret?"

"Well, it seems that the old man was a deuce of a boy in his younger days, like what we young fellows are now, don't you know?"

"Is it possible?"

"Quite true. The old man has thought the past dead and buried, but such things are hard to keep down. Now, Nate Bradley knows of this secret, and he will use it as a rod of terror over the old man—"

"Meaning Judge Brackett?"

"Certainly—of course! And the old man hadn't dare to defy him, for the bulk of the con-

sequences would fall upon Alice, and he's right fond of his girl."

"What is this secret?"

"Oh! the old man once had a superfluity of wives—not that he was to blame; I quite exonerate the old gent—but an expose would make it *divulish* unpleasant for Alice, you know."

"Where did you learn this?"

The little man twirled his white mustache, shut one eye and tried to look wise.

"Oh! I dropped on the racket!" he nonchalantly returned.

"Tell me more about the exact nature of the secret."

"I would if I could, Kean, but I am not in possession of the facts. All I know is that the old man at one time had more wives than the law would allow."

"Can you believe Judge Brackett capable of that?"

"Bless you! not intentionally. The old man is a born gentleman, and his family stands A1, or I would not associate with them. His position grew out of some mistake, and no blame can be attached to him: not a grain."

"But you think Nathan Bradley will use the fact to press his suit for Miss Brackett's hand?"

"Demme! yes; I do."

"Abram Brackett will crush him!"

"Ah! but he don't aim at the old man. A gent in the judge's present position can defy calumny, but not so with a young lady. Alice don't know of the secret, and I'll bet my good right hand that the old man would rather die than have her know. That is Nate's hold. He says to the old man: 'Favor me, or I will tell your secret!' and for Alice's sake, the old man may weaken. Demme! it's a shame!"

Young Nicholson's manner showed the extreme of selfishness. He gave no pity to Alice or the judge, but reserved all for himself. He considered the state of affairs a "shame" simply because his own plans were endangered.

"How many know of this secret?" pursued Garry Kean.

"Probably only Bradley, the judge and myself."

"Did Bradley tell you?"

"Bah! do you suppose I would associate with that low creature? No, indeed; he did not tell me. Now, don't try to learn any more, Kean; I ought not to have told so much. You can rest assured that Bradley's game won't work. I, and I alone, shall win Alice!"

Nicholson's extreme gratitude for Garry's leniency had begun to grow less, and with it went his disposition to be confidential. He remembered that the Man with Backbone was a rival, and there was suspicion and hostility in the glance which accompanied the last words.

"I should say that Bradley would have no chance with you," Kean observed.

This bit of flattery was not taken in good part. Elmer was conceited to an extreme, but the tide had turned wholly against the actor. Elmer was angry. He remembered that Kean was his rival, and hated himself for having talked so freely with him. He realized, with all his conceit, that the advantage of stature and looks was with his companion, and hated him for that, too.

"We won't talk about the matter," he answered, in a surly tone.

"As you wish."

Garry looked at his watch and added:

"I shall have to leave you now, but hope we may meet again, Mr. Nicholson. Good-day!"

He offered his hand, and the boy accepted it ungraciously. Another moment and Kean was retracing his steps through the theater, and Elmer lost no time in going the opposite way. He had put several rods between him and the building when he remembered that he had not recovered his bowie-knife and the attached note of warning.

Recollection of it caused him to turn back at once. He discovered the knife on the floor, but the note was not to be found. This troubled him. He had, when composing it, tried to disguise his writing, but did not feel sure that he had been successful.

In any case, such a document was safer destroyed than in existence. Its authorship could not be proved against Captain Kidd, "Abe Bluebeard" or "Raw-beef Rube," but *could* be laid to his door, if Kean saw fit.

He went in search of the latter, but the actor was not to be found.

Garry had not lingered about the building. He left at once, and had disappeared behind other edifices before Elmer got around to look for him. He had a definite purpose in view, and did not pause until he reached English John's shanty. He found the miner at home.

"Aha! so you're back?" was John's greeting.

"Yes; but you are ahead of me."

"Jes' so, but I didn't come until my business was done."

"Have you seen Miss Brackett?" Garry asked, eagerly.

"Garrick, I hev!"

"And my note?"

"D'ivered."

"Is there an answer?"

"Slowly, pard, slowly. Miss Electa Parsons was with her."

"What about Electa?"

"She is a fine woman—a wounded fine woman," declared the miner, with great emphasis.

"I infer she did not prove a Cerberus?"

"Great heavings—a what?"

"An obstacle in your way."

"Skeercely, pard, skeercely. Electa ain't any tyrant. She's got a woman's heart, and it's a prime one. Garry, I admire that woman."

"You do right; but tell me what occurred."

"I will. I come on ter the two lovely females out fer a promenade, jest as you s'pected they would be, an' I waltzed up ter them. Electa looked at me with respectable coldness—in fact, I may say she looked daggers—but when Alice knowed I was there, she wa'n't cold. Garry, it would have done ye good ter see her cheeks flush, her eyes sparkle, an' her sweet voice ask ef you was wal."

"Heaven bless her!" uttered Kean.

"She's one in a thousand. Wal, I tol her you was all right, an' that you'd writ a letter you wanted her ter read. At that Electa growed severe."

"'Mister Man,' says she, 'remember I am here! I am the shappyrum o' this young lady, an' guarddeen o' her acts. Thar has been,' says this fine woman, 'strange doin's an' goin's on, which I hev allowed ag'in' my better jedgment. Now,' says she, 'I must see an' read that letter afore Alice reads it.'"

"The young lady reminded her that, bein' blind, she could not read it herself, anyhow, but Electa explained that she must read it privately, meditate on ter it, an' decide whether Miss Alice ought ter see it. I tol her that was all right; that we fully agreed ter that; but she had more ter say. She had a good 'eal ter say; in fact, she was what might vulgarly be called 'wound up,' an' she spoke about thusly:

"'This hyar is a world o' iniquity,' sez she, 'where the good an' deservin' hev a wounded hard time. The evil-doers is up an' at us,' sez she, severely, 'an' we must buckle on our armor an' fight the ineny. Joan Dorsey did so, an' she made a hijjus fear an' tremblin' among the scribes an' Pharisees. Joan Dorseys ain't common,' sez she, glarin' malevolently at me, 'but I am one, an' my armor is on ter me!'"

"I didn't see what all this meant, nor how it te'ched the case in pint; but I knowed my duty. I spoke soothin' to the good dame, an' she got right down off her high hoss an' was as pooty an' balmy as a sunflower."

"And she read my note?" inquired Garry.

"She did, an' she said of you thusly: 'He is a proper young man, an' an angel couldn't take offense at this effusion, unless she was too good for airth.'"

"Next she read it aloud. Miss Alice hearkened closely, an' I reckon she was a bit disapp'inted ter find that you had so little to say."

"I wrote that I thanked her a thousand times for saving me from the mob; that I feared to meet her myself, lest I should add to her troubles; that, above all other things, I had her interests at heart, and that I wished her to write and tell me if she wished me to leave town."

"Jes' what Electa read. You said a good 'eal, but you might 'a' said more. Still, you pleased her amazin', an' as other eyes than hers—poor lamb!—was ter read it, mebbe you said enough."

"But the answer, John; the answer."

"Here 'tis, right from her hand, an' not from hern, neither, but from Electa's. She writ it, an' ef you don't prize it too high, I'd like it ter wear in my left-hand breast-pocket. B'ar in mind that 'Lecta writ it!"

The big miner heaved a big sigh, but Garry did not hear it. He had hastily seized the letter. It was on the back of his own communication, and was in prim, old-fashioned writing, but it had potent attraction. It was as follows:

"DEAR MR. LAWRENCE:—I have received your note with pleasure, and am glad to hear that you are well. You speak very highly of my share in defeating the rioters, and I thank you for your kind words. The fact that I *could* defeat them is happiness to me. You ask me if you shall go away from this city, or stay. If it were not for one thing, I should earnestly ask you to stay, but if you do remain, I do not think you will see me. My father has told me that I am to leave town this evening—whither, I do not know and cannot surmise."

Garry Kean's face grew blank and dismayed, and the fact did not escape English John's notice.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong! I should say so!"

"The two women had an argument over the letter. Has—has the gal give ye the mitten?"

Honest John asked the question anxiously, but it remained unanswered. Garry was reading on:

"My father has never been more kind and gentle, but there is something pitiful in his kindness; it is as though he were in deep trouble. I have not had courage to tell him what I did last night to baffle the rioters; I do not know if it is known to him. For some reason he has decided that I must leave Jack's Delight, but where we are to go I do not know. I think it will be a secret journey. Of one thing I am sure—he will not be severe with me."

"Mr. Lawrence, I have not answered your question—'Shall I leave Jack's Delight, or stay?' How can I answer? If I were to be here, I should be sorry to have you go. But where am I to go?—where

remain? I do not know; I am wholly at loss. I dare not advise you."

At this point there was a break, several words having been written and afterward crossed out. Evidently, it had been thought they were unreadable, but it was not so. Garry had keen eyes, and he read:

"I shall be very sorry if—"

The sentence had not been finished. He read on:

"In conclusion, I thank you very much for all your goodness. I believe in you now; I always shall. I hope we shall meet again."

"ALICE."

That was the end, and the paper dropped from Garry Kean's hand and fluttered unheeded to the floor.

CHAPTER XV.

A QUEEN IN GRACIOUS MOOD.

"BAD news, pard, ain't it?" English John asked.

"Alice is to leave this town!" Kean answered.

"How's that?"

"Her father is going to take her away—whither, she does not know. All is wrapped in mystery."

"By Cain! he is down on you!"

"Is it that, or—"

Kean paused, thought of the secret alleged to be in possession of Nathan Bradley, and wisely suspected that the cause might rest there.

"She don't speak severe, pard?" continued John.

"The letter is friendly, but she cannot tell what she does not know; she cannot tell where she is going."

"You bet yer socks she will find a way o' lettin' you know as soon as she gits thar!"

Garry's face brightened, and then grew grave again.

"The judge may prevent her from writing."

"He may try!" John wisely returned, "but ef you think any man, be he a jedge, President or what-not, kin stop a gal from writin' when she sets out ter write, you don't know the female sex. Lord! Lord! I'd rather try ter head off a troop o' wild hosses, or a prairie fire, than a woman who sets out ter do a thing!"

And John wagged his gray head and assumed a very philosophical cast of countenance.

The Man with Backbone picked up the fallen letter. As far as it was in itself concerned, he could not feel disappointed. What Alice would say to him was not what she would naturally dictate for Electa to write, nor what that lady would write, if told. On the whole the letter was satisfactory, and he would be foolish, indeed, to feel that he had not received what was due him.

The news it contained was quite a different thing. The judge had not decided to remove Alice from Jack's Delight without good cause, nor was he a man to leave behind a trail which all could follow who would. He obviously wished to separate the girl from the scenes and persons most familiar to her, and the work would not be done in a bungling manner.

"I'll agree to find out whar they go," John added.

"How?"

"Did you ever hear o' Daniel Boone?"

"Certainly."

"He could foller a trail, an' I reckon I kin. Say the word, Garry, an' I'll dog em to headquarters."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"It would be dishonorable."

"Why?"

"I trust I am not a spy, nor the employer of one."

"Easy, Garry, easy. You speak without thinkin'. Ef you had any mean purpose in view, it *would* be off-color ter dog 'em; but where is the dishonorableness o' *this* case? You are the gal's friend, an' you owe no ill will ter Brackett. S'pose you do foller the percession an' see whar Alice is took, where does the mean part come in? Who knows, too, but she may hev enemies, an's that they may not be waitin' ter do damage? Wouldn't it be wal fur sech a good friend as you to know whar she is, so ef you seen danger risin' ag'in' her, you could go to her rescue?"

English John had argued better than he knew. Garry thought of Nathan Bradley and Elmer Nicholson. Both aspired to take place as Alice's suitor, and both were so destitute of honor that they would let nothing stand in the way of their plans. The time might come when, if he knew of Alice's whereabouts, he could save her from a peril of which the Iron Judge might not know.

He looked at the letter again, and his gaze wandered to the words which had been imperfectly marked out.

"I shall be very sorry if—"

What had been left unsaid? "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," wrote the poet Pope, and Garry Kean found consolation and courage in the unfinished sentence; hope told him that Alice would have said she should be very sorry if they never met again, but that she, or Electa, had believed the expression too strong for a young lady to use to a man with

whom she had been acquainted for such a short time.

"What's the verdict, pard?" asked the miner.

"I shall yield, in a measure."

"Good!"

"We will endeavor to follow the party, but if the work at any time takes a character which shames my manhood too much, I shall give it up."

"Perfectly fit an' proper."

"I wish I was as cheerful as you are."

"Land love ye, Garry! I can't help it. It comes as nat'ral ter me as it does ter chaw terbarker!"

"Your honor is not menaced."

"Is yours?"

"Consider my reputation here. I do not say it to boast, but I came of an honorable family, and I have tried to do them no discredit. What is my reputation here? I am bated by the roughs and despised by the better class, and all through no fault of my own. In all Jack's Delight, I can count but two friends, one of whom is yourself."

"Don't be downcast by that, my lad. All men have a turn in this world, an' knaves git thein, but what good does it do 'em? I've heern tell there is bugs, or some sech reptyles, who are born at sun-up; get ter their prime at noon; an' die at sun-down. That's the way with villains; they may flourish for awhile, but they are sure ter git cut off soon. Honest folks may hev troubles, but they come out on top at the end, an' when once thar they ride through life in a blaze o' glory that beats a Roman blow-out!"

Garry smiled faintly. He was grateful to John, because he so plainly showed his sympathy and good will, but philosophy is a poor comforter when not backed up by events.

The men talked for some time longer, and laid plans for the expected events of the night. When it was all over, Garry grew despondent and felt a desire to be alone. English John was a good friend, but there are times when any society is obnoxious.

The actor was in such a mood, and he bade John good-day and left the hut. The first thing that he saw was the green, tree-covered hills, and it was a sight which pleased him just then. He walked briskly in that direction.

Jack's Delight was not a large place, and he was not long in leaving the furthest hut behind him. His course was along the road to Bearcoop City, and it was no surprise when, before he had reached the wild locality which was his destination, he heard the sound of wheels in the rear.

He looked around.

Along the road a carriage was coming at a good rate of speed. It was a fine turn-out. Two black horses in glittering harnesses were at the pole, and a gorgeous creature in a fawn-colored suit, huge buttons and high hat sat upon the box as stiff and upright as an Egyptian obelisk. Nor was that all—a lady occupied the seat of honor.

There was but one such outfit in Jack's Delight. It was Mrs. Abram Brackett's, and Mrs. Brackett now held her usual place.

Garry gave them plenty of room. He had never spoken with Mrs. Brackett, and felt no interest in her. He expected her equipage to whirl past and bury him temporarily in dust, but errors in judgment will often occur.

Much to his surprise the magnificent obelisk on the box reined in the black horses, and stopped not ten feet from the Man with Backbone. The latter turned and saw Mrs. Brackett motioning to him.

"Please enter!" directed the noble lady, graciously.

Garry was astonished. Few things would have surprised him more. He knew the lady's reputation in a measure—knew that she was reputed to be proud and haughty to an extreme—and why she should deign to address him was a mystery. He did not, however, fully understand the domestic situation at Brackett house, and it flashed upon him that this might be the beginning of a better state of affairs.

Mrs. Brackett had made room for him beside her, and the invitation was not declined. The gracious voice; the white, jeweled hand and the lovely face held potent attraction, but not that by which the female Cæsar was accustomed to rule her admirers.

All her charms now seemed to speak for Alice, and he yielded, not from gallantry to Mrs. Brackett, but from devotion to her step-daughter.

"Drive on!" further directed the lady, and the grand creature in buttons obeyed.

Mrs. Brackett turned to Garry.

"You see I have not forgotten you," she said, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Indeed!"

"I should not have taken you into my carriage, however, if the place had been less retired."

"In any case, I appreciate the honor," asserted Garry.

"Probably we shall agree very well."

"Thank you."

"I presume, though, you would prefer the company of Miss Brackett."

The prevailing idea that Agatha was jealous

of her fair step-daughter did not receive confirmation then. She turned her face fully upon Kean, and her expression was smiling—more, it was indulgent and playful.

"Madam," answered perplexed Garry, "if you will allow the expression, I will say that, between you, you and Miss Brackett monopolize the charms of all Idaho!"

"You are very kind. I wish you to be kinder."

"I do not comprehend."

"Miss Brackett is now a young lady."

"Yes, madam."

"I am jealous of her."

The speaker struck Garry playfully with her fan, and smiled charmingly upon him, and he, not being aware how truthfully she spoke, regarded it as a very good joke.

"Surely," he answered, "Mrs. Brackett ought not to fear any rival. She would not, if she knew how the people of Jack's Delight regard her."

"Do they speak well of me?"

"They do, indeed!"

"Am I to believe you, Mr. Lawrence?"

"I speak with sincerity, madam. The mere sight of you passing through the streets creates excitement. Jack's Delight is proud of what is—pardon me if I say grand and beautiful—and, stranger than I am, I have often heard it said that you reign without a rival."

"The king is dead; long live the king!" murmured Mrs. Brackett. "We are soon forgotten. We are all butterflies; creatures of brief life. All kings and queens ultimately give place to some new meteor of the heavens. It will be so with me if I temporize, but, having seen my danger, I shall meet it boldly. It is a generous queen who will use a rival well. I will be generous. Mr. Lawrence—here the lady's voice grew firm and business-like—"I wish you to elope with my step-daughter!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EX-ACTOR IS INVITED TO ELOPE.

If Garry Kean had been puzzled, he was now dumfounded. He looked doubtfully at his fair companion.

"I am not sure I understood you," he answered.

"I wish you to elope with Alice Brackett," was the deliberate response.

"Upon my word, Mrs. Brackett, I am surprised!"

"You hardly expected a favorable decision, eh?"

"What! Has the judge—"

"I have not seen the judge."

"Then Miss Brackett—"

"She and I have had no words upon the subject."

"Then I do not understand your interest."

"Stupid man!" exclaimed Agatha, in disgust. "Do you fear the coachman will overhear us? That would be impossible under any condition, while as to my servant, he is utterly deaf. My money is in his ears, if I may speak so coarsely, and he hears nothing which I wish should remain secret. Speak out, Mr. Lawrence! Having taken the decisive step, you should not be timid. I will aid you to elope with Alice."

"Perhaps Miss Alice would have something to say."

"Has she not given her consent?"

"To elope with me?"

Garry's voice expressed unbounded surprise, and Mrs. Brackett plainly became disgusted.

"Sir, if you want my aid you will have to drop this low comedy!" she severely declared.

"Madam, I crave your pardon if I am giving offense, but"—Garry was duly prudent—"I do not understand why you have made such a remarkable proposition to me."

"Then why did you write to me?"

"Write to you? I have never done so."

Mrs. Brackett impatiently produced a sheet of letter-paper, held it before the ex-actor and pointed to the signature at the foot of the note.

"Is, or is not, that your name?" she demanded.

Kean looked in surprise.

"It is my name, but I never wrote the letter," he quickly answered. "It is a forgery!"

A swift change overspread Mrs. Brackett's face; she looked doubtful and extended her hand to take the paper; hesitated and drew back.

"Read it!" she directed.

Her companion obeyed, and rapidly perused the following lines:

"MRS. BRACKETT:—You will, no doubt, be surprised to receive this letter, but I ask your pardon, and appeal to your well-known sympathy and good will to read patiently. If I intrude upon you, pray consider the circumstances."

"Madam, I love your daughter, the adorable Alice, to distraction! Since I have seen her she has been the bright, beaming star of my existence; I live only in hope of her. Life with her would be a Paradise; without her, it would be a desert drear. Unfortunately, the course of true love does not run smooth; Judge Brackett frowns austerely upon my consuming passion. Alas! I am in despair!"

"In this horrible condition, madam, I appeal to you. You are a woman, and must pity an unfortunate wretch whose life-boat is careening in the deadly rapids. Dear madam, pity me! I aspire to wed our Alice, and if you will aid me, I will bless you. How? you will ask. I reply: Elopement is

the only remedy. In that I trust, and in you. Will you help me? I implore your aid. I will be by the north road at four o'clock to-day, if you will drive that way, and will see you and arrange matters. May I rely upon you?"

"I promise to tenderly cherish Alice. I have been a wild blade, and have sown a free crop of wild oats, but have resolved to reform. Wine and cards I forsake from this time, and I will lead an honest life. I promise it. Faithfully yours."

"HUBERT LAWRENCE."

The ex-actor handed back the letter in grim silence.

"What have you to say?" Mrs. Brackett asked.

"Madam, the man who wrote that letter ought to go to State's Prison!"

"Are you so scrupulous as that?"

"Probably you do not understand me. No doubt you thought me the writer, but you must have despised me as you read; you must have seen the writer was a fool or a villain. I know he was both. No sensible man would write in such terms; the letter is nauseating. Observe the extravagant, sentimental, high-flown—ay, idiotic—expressions. No man with brains would indulge in such bombastic language. No matter how deep his affection might be for a lady, respect for himself, if not for her, would lead him to eschew terms so extravagant."

The Man with Backbone spoke with emphasis, and his indignation was so manifest that Mrs. Brackett's face grew gloomy.

"Then you really did not write it?" she asked.

"I did not."

"Who did?"

"Some of my enemies; I am not prepared to say who."

This was not stating that he did not know. He did know; in the high flown language, as well as in the writing, itself, he saw the handiwork of Elmer Nicholson.

"Why was it done?" continued the lady.

"To injure me."

"How?"

"It was expected that you would at once give the note to Judge Brackett."

Agatha was silent. The reply was convincing, and she saw that she had been deceived. This angered her—not because of the trick, but because it was not the reverse. She could forgive the plotter, but not the fate which made his work a farce. She had hoped to get rid of her step-daughter, and all her plans had gone to ruin. She mechanically folded the letter, and, as she did so, her gaze chanced to rest upon the lines where the writer promised to be on the "north road" at four o'clock.

She showed the words to Kean.

"If you were ignorant of this letter, how did you happen to be here to keep the appointment made by this mysterious writer?"

"It was chance, and nothing more. I came out for an idle ramble, little dreaming of seeing you. As for the scoundrel who wrote this, he could not have known that I would be here."

"He did one good thing, in bringing us together."

"Observe the last lines of his infamous effusion," added Kean, bitterly. "Wine and cards I forsake from this time!" Fine language to put into my mouth! It would appear to be a confession that I had been a drunkard and gambler. What if Judge Brackett had seen this letter?"

"You owe me gratitude for not showing it to him."

"So I do, Mrs. Brackett, and I thank you cordially."

"Bad as the letter is, good may come of it."

"How?"

Mrs. Brackett did not answer at once, but looked steadily, critically at the ex-actor.

"You look like a man of courage," she finally observed.

"Thank you."

"Are you such?"

"I am generally able to take care of myself, madam."

"The Man with Backbone, they call you," added Agatha, musingly.

"Idle talk, Mrs. Brackett."

The lady suddenly aroused.

"Suppose you make the title good?"

"How?"

"This letter"—she tapped the paper with her shapely finger—"speaks of an elopement."

"Yes. May misfortune seize—"

"Why shouldn't we have an elopement?"

Mrs. Brackett spoke with determination. Her manner was very business-like, and she faced her companion and studied his face closely.

"Between whom?" Kean asked.

"You and Alice!"

"Mrs. Brackett, you will excuse me, I trust, but is this a trap?"

"A trap? What do you mean, sir?"

"Being only human, I cannot overlook the possibility that this is an effort to learn my own plans and purposes. If so, I will say—"

"I could be angry with you, stupid creature!" asserted the lady, with considerable severity, "but I will admit that your own position is delicate. Possibly you are wise to be cautious, but you need not doubt me. I speak with sincerity, and announce myself as your ally. Will you elope?"

"Mrs. Brackett, you will have to show your hand more plainly," Garry firmly announced.

She settled back with an air of resignation.

"The stupidity of men is amazing!" she declared. "Who termed them the lords of creation? A man, of course; nobody else would be so foolish. The world is ruled by men, but they rule merely by their physical strength. Of mental strength they have none, but they make up for the deficiency with stubbornness. Yes; men rule by physical strength and mental stubbornness. As for perception, they have none. A woman can read another's mind like an open book; she suspects all secrets as soon as they are in existence; a hint will lead her to understand the whole; a glance, or an unguarded tone, will tell more to her than a volume can to a man. Having seen and heard, she is never at a loss as to what is true and what is false; her perspicacity is marvelous. Woman is an eagle-eyed reader of the human race; man is a blind bat!"

"You speak eloquently, madam," responded the ex-actor, with perfect good humor. "You would lead me to expect that you will yet be a great philosopher, did I not remember that all such persons have been men."

"We will not argue the point. You are puzzled to know why I wish you to elope. I am surprised. Have I not told you that I am jealous of Alice?"

"You did say so."

"That should give you the clew. She is no longer a child; she is pretty; and despite her blindness, she will yet be my rival if she stays here. For that reason, believing that you are a worthy young man, I am prepared to take sides against Abram Brackett and aid you and Alice to elope."

"Do you think this would be well for Alice?"

"Don't you intend to use her well? Are you not able to care for her?"

"I do; I am. Thus briefly can I answer your questions, but the subject is not so easily disposed of. An elopement is a serious thing for a young lady to engage in, especially when she has a father as kind as Judge Brackett. I do not think Alice would agree to such a thing, and, as highly as I regard her, I shall certainly not suggest it to her!"

Mrs. Brackett looked disgusted.

"Have you no spirit?" she demanded.

"A measure, probably."

"And you throw this chance away?"

"I see no occasion for it."

"Does Judge Brackett approve of your suit?"

"I intend to convince him that I am a man by birth, breeding, social standing and character suitable to be his associate. This may seem a sentimental claim to aristocratic conditions, but it is not; I have no more love for the upper ten than for the lowly million; but I must not forget that the Bracketts have social position, and may demand something in return."

"Do you not see that, by means of an elopement, you can capture all at one stroke?"

"By a dishonorable act."

"Nonsense!"

"Were Alice a few years older, and in possession of her sight, it would be different. As it is, I should be doing wrong to suggest such a thing. Thanking you for your interest, I must decline to act in the case."

Kean spoke politely, but this did not prevent Mrs. Brackett from being both disgusted and angry. She had been acting no part; she was sincere in her offer; and the failure of the plan to get rid of Alice was extremely irritating. She had thought the chance secure when she received the letter; on learning that it was forged, she had played a strong card and—lost!

She despised Garry Kean for what she considered his lack of manliness. She was not troubled with the possession of what she regarded as his finical scruples.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WATCHERS ARE PUZZLED.

In her anger and disappointment Mrs. Brackett was strongly tempted to order the ex-actor from her carriage, at once, and compel him to walk back, but diplomatic measures prevailed. It occurred to her that, although her plans were frustrated, then fate might yet make the man useful to her. As long as he remained a suitor for Alice's hand he was, in a measure, an object of interest. True, she had spoken of him contemptuously in Abram Brackett's presence, and she did not believe in his claims to good descent at all, but he was a marriageable man, and, as such, might yet take Alice out of her path. It would not do to offend him.

"You have disappointed me greatly," she said, "but I am not going to quarrel with Alice's friend."

"I appreciate your forbearance, madam."

"We will remain allies, in a measure, but if I am ever to help you win Miss Brackett, we had better keep up the impression that we are strangers."

Kean smiled slightly. His fair companion had declared that he had no intuitive perception, but he read her well at that moment. Her excuse was not candid. In point of fact, she was too proud to admit acquaintance with him; she would be ashamed to know one so humble. Mrs.

Brackett was not the worst person in the world, nor was she the best.

The ex-actor readily acquiesced in her plan, and then she ordered the statue in buttons to turn and drive back to the village. The order was obeyed, and they were soon on the homeward course.

No further reference was made to private affairs. Mrs. Brackett gave Garry no chance to say more, even had he wished to. She talked steadily, but it was upon minor matters, and she concealed her chagrin with the art of a clever woman. She did not take her companion to the village with her. At the point where she had taken him into the carriage the statue in buttons was directed to stop. Kean took the hint and stepped out; a few words were said at parting; the carriage rolled away; and the ex-actor was again alone.

He had not enjoyed the coveted solitude, but it no longer had charms for him. Straight to English John's shanty he went.

"What sort of a woman is Mrs. Brackett?"

He sprung the question upon John without warning, but after a look of wonder, the miner recovered his composure.

"She's a woman o' parts," he returned.

"What am I to understand by that?"

"Part angel an' part tiger-cat."

"Not an unusual combination in woman. Which predominates in Mrs. Brackett?"

"Each has its roostin'-place. The angel is outside; the tiger-cat within."

"I infer that you don't admire her."

"Pard, she's royally handsome."

"Granted!"

"But selfish as woman can be. The hub of the universe, in her opinion, is Mrs. Judge Brackett."

"Just how bad is she?"

English John closed one eye and nodded sagely.

"You can't tell how bad folks be until they're tempted. I don't mark Mrs. B. down as very bad."

"Yet, your opinion is not favorable?"

"Right! She ain't a woman ter descend ter crime, but ter serve her own ends, an' carry out her schemes, she would go so fur on ter thin ice that it would crackle like sin under her pooty feet. She's selfish, an' she's greedy o' power. I've tol' ye afore how things stand at Brackett's. They go their way, an' she goes hern."

"You referred to this, but only casually."

"I didn't s'pose you cared much."

"Just now, I do."

"Why?"

The question was asked, and the answer was not delayed. Kean told the whole story, while John listened with eager attention. When he had heard all he declared that Mrs. Brackett was "a deep 'un!"

"What scheme is back of this?" Garry asked.

"Do you think there is one?"

"I am in doubt what to think."

"B'lieve Mrs. Brackett. I reckon she told the truth. She's a queer critter. She's the judge's wife, but they keer fur each other no more nor I do fur them. I dar' say they don't quarrel, but they go diff'rent ways. Mrs. B. has always ignored Alice, an' I b'lieve she told the truth like a little man when she said she was jealous of Alice an' wanted ter git red o' her."

"What if Brackett knew of this?"

"He'd guard his darter all the closer. With a foe in his own house he would be right on his muskle, an' that means a good 'eal when Abram B. is concerned."

"Mrs. Brackett is a dangerous woman. She may not intend to do anything serious, but her schemes may yet prove quicksands to envelop her and others."

"That's about the size of it, pard."

"Well, we will let her rest. Important a factor as she may become in the future, she does not seem to concern us now. What we have to think of is the coming night, and the expected events thereof. It seems that Mrs. Brackett has not been informed that Alice is going away. This looks very strange, but the explanation may be simple; it may be that she has not been around since the sudden resolution was made. Be that as it may, Alice is going, and if we condescend to follow her, we must make preparations to that end."

The preparations were not elaborate or difficult. The miner had a horse, and it would not be hard to secure another for the time being.

He proved this by engaging one, and then they sat down to a frugal supper.

Half an hour later they left the shanty and the village.

English John knew the surrounding hills well, and knew, too, how to gain a favorable point on the trail by another route through the hills. This way was rough, and they had no small amount of trouble, but the journey was safely made.

They gained the traveled road at an hour considered early, but, to make sure that Alice and her conductors had not passed, John lighted a pine splinter and looked the ground over carefully.

"All kerrect," he announced, cheerfully.

"There ain't no fresh tracks hyar o' any sort,

carriage or t'otherwise. All we have to do is ter wait."

The plan appeared simple enough. They drew their horses into a convenient cover and sat down to wait. Upward of a mile away they could see the glistening lights of the village. The road wound around the intervening country like a huge serpent. This was the course Alice was expected to travel, willingly or unwillingly, with friendly escort or as prisoner, as the case might be.

They watched for the party.

An hour passed—two hours.

Some uneasiness began to be felt. But two interpretations were to be placed upon the delay—either Judge Brackett intended to wrap the affair in complete mystery, by leaving at an extremely late hour, or there had been some unexpected check to his plans.

Another hour wore slowly away, and still there was no change. The trail remained as deserted as though no human being had ever traveled it.

The situation was perplexing. There was but one way that the looked-for persons were likely to go. Jack's Delight was situated, with two other mining-towns, in a valley. A very good road connected the three, but carriages could get in and out of the valley by but one course. Any other would lead to the wild, unsettled mountains.

That Alice would be taken there by her father was an idea too absurd to be considered; that she would be taken to one of the other camps in the valley was out of the question, for they were so near each other that the affairs of all were common property for comment. Alice would not be hidden there.

Garry and the miner discussed the matter in all its bearings, but, when midnight had come and passed, finally arrived at the conclusion that they were having their trouble for nothing.

They brought out their horses, mounted and rode toward Jack's Delight.

It was an uneventful ride. No human being was seen on the way, and when they finally emerged from the hills, they were none the wiser. The village lay before them, and, from that point, not a light was to be seen. They left their horses in cover and continued their way on foot, determined to have a look at Brackett's house.

The first sight increased their curiosity—in striking contrast to its neighbors, the house was lighted.

"What does this mean?" Kean demanded.

"You've got me!" John admitted. "Can't be they've got company?"

"Assuredly not. No light shows on the lower floor; they are all above. What is more to the point, one of the lighted rooms is Alice's."

"Fact."

"Something is wrong!"

"Oh! I reckon not."

"Explain it, then."

"Mebbe they're jest preparin' fur [the journey."

"Hardly! After all their pains to keep it secret, they would not make such a stir now. A journey deliberately postponed to this hour is a secret journey, and such publicity as this would jeopardize all their aims."

"Somebody may be sick."

"Yes; or a start may have been made, and the journey prevented by an accident."

"I hope the little gal ain't hurt."

"Her room is lighted."

"Oh! I guess she's all right!" declared the miner, observing that Garry was really troubled.

"I hope so, but I cannot understand the matter."

"It's too late ter inquire."

"Most decidedly."

Not wishing to be noticed near the house they retired to a safe distance, yet where they could themselves keep up the vigil. The Man with Backbone felt positive that there was a mystery about the house which concerned Alice, and not pleasantly. Something had interrupted the journey. What was it? One of a good many simple causes might be the reason, but if it was an ordinary matter, why did the light show in her room at that hour?

The watchers discussed this point without satisfaction, but were not disposed to give up easily. They kept their place and used their eyes the best they could. One thing tended to increase their apprehensions. Several times a shadow was cast temporarily upon the lowered curtains of Alice's room. Someone was moving about there, but who it was they had no means of knowing.

Two hours longer they watched, and then all the lights went out. Whatever was the mystery of the house, they were to see no further indications of it that night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TROUBLESOME SUSPICION.

At ten o'clock the next forenoon Judge Brackett left his house and walked down the street. His carriage had never been more erect, or his iron face more proud and firm. To all appearances he was a man without a trouble or a care.

After going a few rods he stopped in front of a neat cottage and rung the bell. The house was that of Doctor Reed Crandall, but as the judge's manner was so cool and deliberate, he did not appear to be seeking medical aid.

He was soon in the presence of the doctor, an ordinary-looking man of middle age.

"Well," said Brackett, with sudden eagerness, "what is the report?"

"I don't know what to say," Crandall admitted.

"Have you made a chemical analysis?"

"To the best of my ability, but you will remember that I warned you how imperfect were my facilities."

"True. Go on."

"I am not able to say anything definite. We shall have to await a report from Boise City, I think."

"Which means a delay of several days."

"Yes, sir."

"This is very annoying."

"That is true, judge, but you will remember that I am a physician in the gold regions. Even as the merchants here have an inferior stock of goods, so am I limited as to quantity and quality. I hope to grow with the city, but that does not help us now."

"You see no reason to change your opinion?"

"None."

"And the symptoms point to poisoning by arsenic?"

"They do."

"It is alarmingly strange!" uttered Abram Brackett, his forehead contracted in a gloomy frown. "Had the blow been aimed at me, it would not have been surprising; for every time I sentence a criminal, I make three scores of enemies among the Reds—or, rather, add fresh fuel to their hatred of me as an instrument of law."

"The poison may have been intended for you."

"Possible, but not probable."

"Has not further meditation caused you to suspect some particular person?"

"No. My servants are few, and I believe them to be perfectly honest and upright. I do not believe one of them would harm me, while as to Alice—why, they might as well hold enmity against an angel!"

"Miss Brackett's virtues are well known to me; I have often seen her by the bedside of my suffering patients."

"No one could harm her."

"I believe you," Crandall replied. "As to the poison, if such it was, may not some one have had it in the house for innocent purposes?"

"I cannot conceive why they should."

"Would it not be well to inquire?"

"To do that would be to admit our suspicions, and, besides, the one who had it might be alarmed and deny all knowledge. I have already asked if Alice might not have taken some foreign substance by error, and no one would admit knowledge of such a possibility."

"Perhaps it would be well to wait until we have a definite verdict. I only await your orders to send to Boise City."

"Send at once."

"I will do so. Do not let my suspicions trouble you, for it may prove that I am wrong. If Miss Brackett really took any poison into her stomach, her present promising condition is due to Electa Parsons. The emetic administered upon her own responsibility may have saved the young lady's life. The only regret is that, having induced your daughter's stomach to relieve itself of its contents, the woman threw it away. We thus lost the part best of all for chemical analysis, and that the most strongly impregnated with whatever injurious element was there. The one period of nausea after I arrived produced but little effect, and it is of that I have a specimen for analysis."

"Send to Boise City at once!" Brackett tersely ordered.

"I will do so."

The judge arose.

"When you have any report to make, send for me. Of course you will continue to visit Alice until she is well, but I do not want any one in the house to know of our having secret conferences."

"That is quite right."

Brackett passed over a roll of bank-notes.

"Spare no expense in your investigation, Crandall. Let it be thorough, whatever the cost. I want light on this mysterious subject."

"I will do my best."

The doctor bowed his distinguished patron out, and then looked thoughtfully after as Brackett walked away.

"Erect and proud of bearing," commented the man of medicine, "but his mind is not at ease. He worships his daughter, and harm to her would kill him, strong man that he is. I suspect he is not dealing frankly with me, but that is his affair. I could almost swear that he suspects some certain person in his household—but, as I said, it is his affair."

And Crandall closed the door.

The judge returned home at once. On the way he met several of his acquaintances, and greeted them with reserved courtesy. No one inquired for Alice, for they did not know she

was ill, and her father did not mention it. He appeared to be in his most "iron" mood.

His expression changed when he entered the house, however, and he inquired anxiously for his daughter. Being told that she was resting comfortably, he entered the parlor.

He sat down, and his face grew stern and thoughtful. Alice's illness complicated matters. It had come suddenly, shortly before he was ready to take her away from the house. Now, she could not go for some time; at the best, she would be unfit for traveling for several days.

This meant a good deal. He had planned to send her away, so that he could deal firmly with the complications besetting him, but the plan had failed. She was still there, and he must meet all questions.

On that day he was to give answers to both Mrs. Brackett and Nathan Bradley, in the matter of their ambitions, and there was no time to form new schemes. He must meet the danger boldly.

All this was in his mind when the door opened and Mrs. Brackett made her appearance. The forty-eight hours allowed him for decision had not fully elapsed, but he had a presentiment that his wife had come to renew her request.

The lady settled down in a comfortable chair and smiled graciously.

"Alice is doing very well," she announced.

"Have you been in to see her?"

"Not personally, but I sent my maid to inquire."

"You have not been in at all, have you?" he continued, in an ominous voice.

"No, judge. I am afraid I should make a poor attendant for the sick, and I have had Alice's well-being in mind. Do not ascribe my course to neglect; it is simply that I should be worse than useless there. My maid, Marie, has made frequent inquiries, though."

Abram Brackett did not press the point. He was disposed to blame his wife for her indifference and lack of sympathy, knowing it was precisely that, and nothing else; but he was of the opinion that her presence would not be advisable in the sick-room.

He was satisfied to have her stay away, but not inclined to overlook her indifference.

"Would it not be well to send to Boise City for a skillful physician?" continued Mrs. Brackett.

"I think Crandall will do very well."

"Remember that Alice is your daughter!"

The reminder from the fair lady might well have provoked a cynical smile from one who knew her as well as the Iron Judge did, but his gloomy face did not change.

"I think she will soon be well again."

"Too much care cannot be taken."

"I agree with you."

"Especially as she is delicate."

"Is she that?"

"Why, most certainly. Why, else, should she have had this illness? I am never ill, nor are you. Alice is frail and weak, and like a precious plant, should be tenderly cared for. I fear she is not long for this world, and, unless due care is used, we shall be bereaved!"

The lady instilled considerable pathos into her voice, and looked sadly at the floor. It was well that she did so. Judge Brackett was regarding her with a gaze so sharp, stern and suspicious that it must have betrayed him had it been observed.

He knew his wife was a hypocrite, and her present course of conversation added fresh fuel to certain suspicions that were in his mind. Why had she observed that Alice was delicate?—that she was not long for the visible world? The judge knew that, barring her present illness, there was no foundation for this prophecy.

Slight as Alice was of figure, in a general way she was strong, well developed physically, and as likely to live to old age as any one else. Her blindness had curtailed freedom of movement, but she was not "frail and weak," as her step-mother had stated.

Others had fallen into the same error, and so expressed themselves to Brackett in the past, and he would not have thought strange of his wife's words had they not come at such a critical time, and been accompanied with professed anxiety which he knew to be assumed.

Fortunately, his dark, suspicious glance was not seen by Mrs. Brackett, and he soon controlled himself.

"May not her present illness arise from other causes?" he asked.

Agatha met his gaze frankly.

"What causes?" she asked.

"Possibly she has taken some injurious substance into her stomach," he suggested.

"What could it be?"

"Can you suggest nothing?"

Husband and wife looked steadily at each other. His gaze was penetrating, but guarded; hers was unwavering and, in appearance, innocently fearless.

"Nothing," she replied, after a pause.

"If we were not all well except her, I should believe something might accidentally have been put in her food," he continued, watching his wife's face closely.

She did not waver or avert her gaze.

"It is hardly likely. I ascribe her illness to her natural physical weakness."

"You may be right."

The judge spoke without hesitation. Convinced that nothing was to be gained by his questions, he was willing to let the matter drop.

"I have come to you on business," observed Mrs. Brackett, manifestly pleased to find a gap in conversation.

"Yes, Agatha."

"You were to give me an answer, to-day, regarding an important matter."

"What is that?"

"Why, as to whether we are to support Colonel Yoke Norman in his ambition to be mayor."

The judge passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

"I have no heart to speak of political intrigues, to-day," he responded.

"But you promised the answer at this time."

"True; but do you not see how I am situated? I can think of nothing but Alice."

"I thought you were a man of iron."

"I should be one with a heart of stone if I forgot my suffering child."

There was a slight flash of the lady's eyes. She gave Abram Brackett no love, and expected none in return, but her jealousy of Alice would not allow her to hear the girl constantly praised, and feel no resentment. She would have vented her irritation in angry words, but nobody knew better than she that the judge could be as immovable as a mountain when his firmness was fully aroused.

Precipitation might defeat her dearest ambition, and humble her lower than the Caesar she admired and criticised in the same breath. She had determined to be forbearing and shrewd; she struggled to remain calm, and succeeded.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE "RED" COMES FOR HIS ANSWER.

PERSUASIVELY Mrs. Brackett made answer.

"The city election is close at hand."

"True."

"And Colonel Norman wishes to declare himself without delay."

"Let him do so. It is not necessary that the first sign of his candidacy should be a procession with you and me walking at the head as bearers of blazing torches."

Brackett spoke with sarcasm, and his wife quickly answered:

"Am I to understand that you decline to give your aid?"

"You are to understand," the judge explained, recovering prudence, "that I cannot consider this matter until I am sure Alice is out of danger. I have no heart for ordinary plans. Do not think me forgetful of your wishes, but it is best that you should consent to a further postponement. Let the matter rest as it is for now."

Mrs. Brackett was disappointed, but she was crafty.

"Of course I am willing to make any sacrifice for your sake, but I am also selfish enough to desire a reward in the future. I will wait a few days, but in return shall expect you to accede to my wishes in due time. I really cannot bear disappointment. The time is come when I can reach the pinnacle of my ambition, and eclipse all the rest of Jack's Delight. By following Colonel Yoke Norman's banner we go to victory, and our small world will be conquered. But when it is, Judge Brackett, I shall not lose my grand station, like the lamented Caesar!"

She paused, hesitated, laughed shortly, and added:

"What a small stake it is, after all—the lead in a town like this. Ah! ah! I could wish for wider fields of operation, but if one lives in a toy-house she can hardly hope to conquer the world. Sufficient for the day is the victory thereof!"

Always power; always ambition! That was the guiding star of Mrs. Brackett's life.

The judge listened with cold contempt. He cared nothing for human glory. As a lawyer and as a judge he had been a marked success, but no dazzling light of increased greatness could lure him on. Had he been appointed chief justice of the United States, he would have taken the office because it was, so to speak, a good business chance, but not one iota of pride would have been aroused by his elevation.

Mrs. Brackett had more to say, and she said it. She spoke with eloquence, referring to the advantages of power and high estate; she paid a tribute—limited—to Caesar; and then graciously informed Abram that, owing to Alice's illness, she would cheerfully postpone consideration of Colonel Yoke Norman's case for a few days.

Then the august lady left the room with a magnificent sweep of her skirts which would have made a queen pale with envy.

When the door closed, the husband looked after her meditatively, but with a changeless face. He was too thoroughly a man of iron to even shrug his shoulders at an ambition which

he could not appreciate, but he had no sympathy with her wishes.

His thoughts soon wandered to other channels.

There was nothing to reassure him in meditation, and he arose and began to pace the room.

"Agatha is disposed of for the time," he thought, "but what of Nathan Bradley? He is to come for an answer this afternoon, and no excuse will pacify him. He will not care whether there is illness in my family or not. He will insist upon an answer—what answer shall I make?"

The judge made an impatient gesture.

"If I could deal as I wish, I would soon answer Nathan Bradley. The scoundrel should be thrown from my house by the servants. More than that, he should be in prison. He has boldly threatened to create a riot here, if the respectable people do not give him a clear road in his ambition to be mayor. The ruffian! I would have him arrested at once for that threat were it not for the secret he holds. That secret cripples me—it is a mill-stone around my neck."

Restlessly Brackett paced the room. He felt wholly helpless, and it was all the more painful because the mood was something new to him.

Accustomed too as he was to meet all emergencies with iron will and a resolute front, he was not fitted, in spite of his strong will, to deal with a crisis like this.

Had he been unscrupulous, he would have used his power to crush Nathan Bradley. It could have been done, but he was not the man to resort to crime.

Presently his mind wandered back to Mrs. Brackett. Here was another fruitful subject for speculation. If he had spoken plainly, he would have admitted that he did not know what to think of his wife.

It was the opinion of Doctor Crandall that Alice had, accidentally or by means of some one's design, taken poison into her stomach, and he inferred that it was arsenic. A year before, the judge had by chance discovered that his wife had a small quantity of that deadly drug in her possession. He had inquired why she had it, and had been satisfied by a careless explanation.

It was not so now.

The incident of the past returned persistently, and connected itself with his thoughts of the present. Had Mrs. Brackett's arsenic figured in Alice's illness? If so, had it been given her by design? If so, who had done it?

Abram Brackett shivered as he reflected upon the subject, but he did not weaken.

"I will await the report from Boise City," he said, aloud; "then, if our suspicions are confirmed, there shall be an investigation. If there is guilt in this house it shall be unearthed—ay! even though it turn the finger of accusation upon the mistress thereof!"

His stern face and contracted brows revealed his irrevocable determination, and Agatha Brackett might well have been troubled had she known of the rising storm.

The day wore on; noon came and passed; the sun began to sink in the heavens.

The door-bell rung, and the prompt servant found Nathan Bradley there.

"Is Brackett in?" Nathan asked, airily.

"Yes, sir; walk in!"

The ready answer pleased the applicant. He knew that his standing was not good with the better class of citizens, and this promptness led him to believe that Brackett had given orders to have him admitted at once.

The judge was in the parlor when Nathan entered, reading a paper with an appearance of calm indifference.

"How are you, Brackett?" saluted the visitor, with gay confidence.

The host looked up without a change of countenance.

"Sit down until I get this article read!" he composedly directed.

Nathan's face flushed slightly, but he obeyed after a little hesitation. Brackett read on serenely for a space of several minutes before he deigned another glance. Then he laid down the paper and looked up.

"The New York stock-market is very firm this week," he remarked.

"Are you interested in stocks?" Nathan asked, sulkily.

"Not at all; but I try to keep abreast the times."

"We are making history right here."

"What! have you branched out as an author?"

"Judge Brackett, have you forgotten the errand which has brought me here?—the appointment we made?"

Nathan spoke angrily, but the Iron Judge showed not a ripple of excitement.

"Not at all," he replied.

"I have come for my answer."

Brackett glanced at the clock.

"The time is not up," he remarked.

"It lacks only a few minutes."

"True and we will overlook the difference."

The judge spoke with calm deliberation which was very annoying to Nathan. Confident as he was, at times, of his ability to bend Brackett to his will, there were other times when he remembered the Iron Judge's resolution and felt doubt-

ful and anxious. The suspense was not pleasant, and with so much at stake, he was eager to know the verdict.

"Well sir?" he returned.

"I have considered your plan, and find much in it of which I disapprove," Brackett declared.

"What?"

"You will never succeed in a 'hurrah' campaign."

"Why not?"

"What particular qualification do you possess for the office of mayor?"

"A desire to 'get there,' and that is all any man can boast of."

"Not badly put; but you must be aware that certain men can so enthuse voters that they carry the people like a tornado. Is it so with you?"

"The 'Reds' are solid, back of me."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Then the majority is against you."

"It is; and it is this majority that I wish to break with your influence."

"Are you aware that Mayor Nicholson has another rival?"

"No. Who is it?"

"Colonel Yoke Norman. He is bound to run. Do you see what this will do for you?"

"No."

"Nicholson and Norman will divide the votes of the 'Blacks,' and when this is done, the 'Reds' can carry a plurality."

"With your influence I can win!" declared Bradley, with emphasis.

"You will not need it."

"But I had rather have it," was the quick reply. "I want you to come out boldly for me, tell your friends that I am the best man for mayor there is out, and throw your influence firmly for me."

"Beyond question, this would result in consolidating the forces of Nicholson and Norman."

"We will run the risk."

"How do you know we will?" sharply demanded Brackett.

"Eh?"

"Having considered the matter fully," the judge calmly replied, "I have determined not to swerve from my old resolution to let politics alone. It is a black and muddy pool, at the best, as politics run, and I want none of the affair."

"Do you decline to aid me, sir?" cried Nathan, angrily.

"I must."

"Do you know the penalty?"

"What is it?"

"The free spreading of your secret. If I cannot make you useful, I will tell the story of Saint Ledair to the wide world. You know what that means—deep disgrace to you. I am no angel, sir; my interests are more to me than yours. Refuse to be my ally and I will ruin you!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE DECLARATION OF WAR.

THE unavoidable moment had come, but it did not appear to affect Abram Brackett in the least.

"We may as well understand each other," he quietly returned. "When you came to me the other day, you took me by surprise, and I was weak enough to delay making a decisive answer. This was not because I thought for a moment of yielding to your demands, but because I wished to consider how I could save Alice from learning ill news."

"She shall hear it if you persist in refusal!" hotly asserted the "Red."

"How do you know she will?"

"Simply because I shall tell her."

"You will not be allowed to enter this house."

"Then I will see her outside."

The judge smiled coldly.

"I doubt it, sir. Let that be as it may, I shall make no terms with you. I will not become a demagogue in any politician's cause, least of all, in that of a scoundrel like you!"

"Beware!" hissed Nathan, pale with anger.

"You observe that I know you as you are. But we will not discuss that. You have challenged me to battle, sir. You have come to me with a request bolstered up with a threat, thereby practically declaring war upon me. I accept your challenge, Mr. Bradley; you can go on and do your worst."

"I shall tell your secret to the first man I meet after leaving this house!"

"Do, so, if you wish."

"Brackett, you are mad! You do not want Alice to hear of this matter."

"If she does hear, she will have the consolation of knowing that the scandal-monger has met his deserts."

"Is this a threat?"

"It is a prophecy. If you make war upon me, I shall crush you!"

"How?"

"I shall find means. One thing is already at hand; I hold the set of resolutions introduced by the Reds in council, when they threatened

that, if their wishes were disregarded, they would place their candidate for the mayoralty in office by means of revolver and knife. As an officer of law, I can at any time proceed against you for threats of violence and inciting others to riot. You are the leader of the Reds; there would be no trouble in proving the charges."

The judge spoke slowly, and with icy composure. There was no evidence of anger or anxiety in his manner, but there was an implacable determination which made Nathan feel ill at ease. Brackett was powerful, and his visitor regarded him as merciless, all of which was bad for the schemer, but his own will was not weak.

He faced his companion firmly.

"At the worst, such a charge would carry with it only a light sentence."

"Is there no more to be charged against you?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

"I do not share your confidence. If you had your just deserts you would already be in prison, and you may rely upon me to use every effort to put you there—to stay. Your character is bad, Nathan Bradley. A jury would not deal lightly with one whose record here had been so dubious and devious. As for your past, I will lay it open, if you molest me, though it cost me a year of time and thousands of dollars!"

"Would that do Alice any good?"

"Do not trouble yourself about Miss Brackett."

"Judge, will you allow your name to be dragged in the mud in this way?"

"No!"

"You can only prevent it by agreeing to my demand."

"I defy you—do your worst! You have your answer now, and I decline to talk longer. You will oblige me by leaving my house!"

"You will yet be sorry—"

Brackett pointed to the door.

"Go!" he sternly ordered.

Nathan arose, his face changing color. He dared not defy the order, for he had an unpleasant conviction that the servants would be summoned to eject him forcibly, but he was full of rage and disappointment. Ever since the judge had asked for delay, he had flattered himself that victory awaited him, and the blow fell much heavier than it would have done had it come at the start. Bitter, indeed, was the result.

"You shall hear from me again—"

"Go!"

The first unfinished sentence was from Nathan; the stern command from Brackett.

"I will have revenge!" uttered the visitor, in a husky voice, but he turned toward the door as he spoke.

He dared not remain longer.

When he reached the hall he turned and looked back. The Iron Judge stood like a statue, but his hand was still extended, pointing an order that the unwelcome caller go at once. It was no dramatic striving for effect, but a silent command to a man he would not degrade himself by addressing further.

Nathan went, and the front door closed after him with a bang.

It was like the first gun of the coming battle, and the hour was full of threatening import.

Between the two men there could be no further parleying. Abram Brackett was not the person to go back on a resolution once formed, and he was ready to fight the foe to the end. He would have ample chance to do so. Nathan Bradley went out of the door with vindictive rage as his all-consuming passion, and he had the will to do any dark deed, even to murder.

He did not pause near the house. With long quick steps he moved toward the west, and in a few minutes he was threading the devious paths between the shanties of the Reds. Straight to his own hut he went, and, as he entered the door, he was greeted by a hearty salutation from Thad Johnson.

That hard citizen was busy with pipe and whisky-bottle, and appeared to have wooed one of the twain too ardently.

"Hyar we be, pard!" he exclaimed. "Does the conquerin' hero come, or don't he come?"

Mr. Johnson regarded this as a very witty and happy greeting, and he felt sure he was about to hear good news, but the result shocked him.

"Silence, you infernal fool, or I'll break your head!" growled Nathan, glad to have chance at last to vent his spite.

"Great Scott!" gasped Thaddeus, "you don't mean you hev failed?"

Nathan hurled his hat into the corner, kicked over a stool and sat down with a bang.

"The devil is to pay!" he announced.

"Did Brackett trifle with ye?"

"Trifle! trifle! Is that what you call it? He told me that if I did not get out of the house, he would call his servants and have me thrown out."

Johnson held up both hands in horror.

"Wal, I never!" he groaned.

"Thad, I am undone."

The coarser ruffian braced up and banged the table with his big fist.

"Don't you be cast down!" he advised. "Ef the jedge ain't for us, he's ag'in' us, an' we've got the Reds at our back. We'll make the jedge git right down on his knees an' weep. Yes, an' what is more, we'll carry the city election, anyhow."

"It isn't that I think of."

"What, then?"

"It is Alice."

"Ah! Um! That is bad!"

"All hope is now gone of inducing Brackett to give his consent to my marriage with his girl."

Johnson ran his hand into his scraggly beard and scratched his chin meditatively.

"That's a fact," he agreed.

"Thad, I feel all cut up. I really like the girl."

"So do I. You can't be blamed an artom."

"I'm hit hard."

"Will ye give up?"

"Give up? What in the world are you thinking of? Do you suppose I will let such a small thing run me off the track? Brackett hates me like sin, and Alice probably would if she knew me well enough; but that don't mean defeat for me. Oh! I am sure of her in the end, but I must resort to severe measures."

"Have you a plan in mind?"

"Yes. She must elope with Garry Kean!"

"Eh?"

"Seem to elope," Nathan amended. "Hopeful as I was of a favorable answer from the judge, I have not forgotten to plan for the future. You know there is to be a so-called masquerade ball at the mayor's, a week hence."

"Yes."

"It will be a big blow-out, and all the notable people will be there. They—"

"All but you'n me, Nate."

"I shall be there."

"What! have you an invite?"

"Have I! They would as soon invite the Evil One. The high-and-mighty goodies of Jack's Delight don't take any stock in me. No; I am not invited, but I shall be there. Trust me for that; I am no slouch, if I do wear my hair short. But to resume. Abram Brackett will be there, grim, surly and ugly—a veritable kill-joy. Divine Mrs. Brackett will be there, beautiful, radiant, happy, full of schemes to further her personal aims and kill off her rivals—a veritable Caesar. Alice will be there, the fairest of them all, sitting by like a fair, delicate flower, drinking in the music and wishing her blind eyes could see—a veritable fairy queen. I shall be, too! I shall be there with my little plots—a veritable Mephistopheles. I'll play Iago to Mrs. Brackett's Caesar. This will be mixing Shakespeare somewhat, but what's the odds as long as we're happy?"

"Go it, Nate; nothin' would make the big-bugs sicker than ter hev a Red git the drop on 'em in society!" cried Thad, in great glee.

"I'll raise what-you-may-call-it with them!" Bradley asserted, viciously.

"But how'll that help you with Alice?"

"She and I'll elope, but throw the blame on Kean."

"How?"

"There will be a hard game to play, but Alice will seem to get an invitation from Kean to skip out and marry him. She will marry me, instead. Being blind, she will not discover the cheat until it's too late."

"Hoorah! your'e a corker!" Johnson agreed.

"It is among the things possible that Garry Kean will get his neck into a confounded fix. Alice and I shall disappear, and the idea will be left in Brackett's mind that Kean has taken her away. Ha! ha! fancy how the walls of Rome will totter around the play-actor."

"Ha! ha!" echoed Johnson.

"My boy, when I'm mayor of this city, Alice will be my wife."

"Thar will be one obstacle ter your plan."

"What one?"

"Electa Parsons."

"You never spoke truer. Even Brackett counts for but little as an obstacle to my success in comparison with that bony female. Electa is a corker! She is devoted to Alice; she is watchful; and she is as shrewd as she is homely, which is saying a good deal. I should have but little hope of success if Electa was to have a chance to swing herself around free on the occasion of the masquerade ball. She must be silenced!"

"How?"

"Never fear; I'll find a way."

"You won't hurt her, will ye?"

"What do you care?"

"Ter tell the truth," answered Thad, a dull sparkle creeping into his whisky-reddened eyes, "I hev a fancy fur Miss Parsons, myself."

"What! that bag of bones?"

"She's got brains an' sand."

"She's got temper enough to make a husband wish he had been born a barn-yard fowl, if she got down on him. However, that is your affair; not mine. If you want to plunge madly into matrimony, go in, Thaddeus. But don't hurry; don't go wooing the young and charming lady until after the ball. Great events are on the books; let courting go for now. Wait until after the ball!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAYING OF THE SNARE.

A WEEK passed. Despite the hostile element at work at Jack's Delight, there had been no irruption. On the contrary, the place had never been quieter, or more peaceful. To casual eyes at night have seemed that even the Reds were reforming. Judge Brackett had never before had so few cases brought before him. Fights and drunken outbreaks were few, and limited as to violence, and the city began to deserve a better name than it had, morally.

That was the way matters looked on the surface.

Under the thin covering mischief was brewing. There were plots and counterplots, and hostility poorly-concealed, and a gathering of strength for the storm to come.

Every one understood that, after the mayor's ball, the political campaign would open briskly. Colonel Yoke Norman had not yet declared himself, but everybody knew he was a candidate. There would be a struggle between him and the present official. This made a good deal of talk, but as it was generally expected that, after some hard feeling, one would be given place over the other, and that the "Blacks" would finally vote solidly against the "Reds," few of the better class expected to see the latter faction present much strength at the polls.

What they did fear was a riot from the self-same Reds, and if they had been aware of Nathan Bradley's schemes, they might well have feared the Reds' ballot, also.

Somewhat to Brackett's surprise, no more had been heard of the incendiary resolutions passed by the Reds in meeting, but he was not deceived by this.

He argued ill from this silence, and future events were destined to prove his judgment good.

There was one cause for rejoicing at the Brackett house. Alice's illness was a thing of the past. She had improved steadily, constantly, and so rapidly that all were surprised. It was abundantly shown that, instead of the weak constitution imparted to her by Mrs. Brackett, she had an excellent constitution, and it did her good service on this occasion.

On the second day of her illness she sat up; on the third she was about the house; on the fourth she declared that she was fully well.

Neither her father nor Dr. Crandall had made new discoveries. No report had been received from Boise City, and it was impossible to say whether there was ground for suspicion of foul play.

Until this point was settled, every one concerned would remain quiet.

Garry Kean was still in the "city." He came and went about the place freely, and had no further trouble. None of his enemies, known or unknown, had done more to annoy him. Outward appearances might well cause the belief that they had seen enough of him, and resolved to let him alone, but he was not deceived by the lull.

Every moment he expected another attack from Nathan Bradley or Elmer Nicholson, and was prepared to meet them when they moved.

He had an object in remaining at Jack's Delight, and did not intend to leave until he was ready, enemies or no enemies.

It was a surprise to him when he received an invitation to the masquerade ball. His straightforward, manly conduct had not been without effect upon the better class of citizens, and many of them had spoken in a friendly way to him of late, but he had not expected an invitation on this occasion.

Having received it, he was not, at first, sure that he would accept it. He had no serious thoughts of doing so until he learned that Alice Brackett always attended such gatherings, and would probably do so again.

From that time Kean was not in doubt; he decided to go.

The eventful evening came. The City Hall, in which the ball was to take place, was brilliantly lighted. The building itself was not to be scorned as a work of architecture. It was large, contained many rooms, among which were the various court-rooms and city offices, and a big hall well fitted for dancing. The people were proud of their building, and they had reason to be.

In due time the guests began to arrive. Nearly all came in mask, and in costumes intended to represent something or other. The prominent exceptions were Judge Brackett and Mayor Nicholson, and a few other prominent men who did not intend to dance.

Mrs. Brackett was there as Cleopatra. She had a really fine costume, but, despite a mask, it was not much of a disguise. She did not intend it should be. Not willingly would she be deprived of the admiration usually showered upon her; she preferred to let every one know her identity without appearing to do so, and make sure that Cleopatra had as much admiration as Mrs. Brackett would if not disguised.

Alice was there as a shepherd girl. Since she could not dance she would gladly have dispensed with a disguise, which could be no disguise, but

as all other ladies wore masks and costumes, she had to follow their example.

Garry Kean figured as a Highlander. With his experience as an actor he might have outdone all others, artistically, but, knowing that he would thereby betray himself beyond recall, he had aimed to disguise his identity so completely that no one would recognize him, yet to make his costume seem careless and clumsy.

A certain number of invitations had been issued, and as the guests entered, the invitation-cards were carefully received at the door. This was done so that no person could gain entrance who was not invited, and the managers flattered themselves that they had succeeded to a charm.

They were never more mistaken.

No person over the specified number was there, yet at least two had entered who were not invited and not wanted.

One masqueraded as a Roman senator, and a more complete disguise could not have been found. His head was so masked and muffled that he might have been a negro and not betrayed the fact. This man was Nathan Bradley, and it was not without an object that he had made himself up as a Roman.

Having secured entrance by a trick, he had played another sharp trick in assuming the part. Knowing that he could defy recognition, he looked forward to a time when, unless his aims miscarried, he would be mistaken for Garry Kean.

The second unbidden guest was Thad Johnson. It was a great night in that man's life. He had been forbidden to dance by Bradley, and did not know how to dance, anyway, so he intended to act a very quiet part, but it was a triumph to go among the people who, he thought, hated him because he was poor and humble. Really, he owed his lowly condition to his low nature, and vicious way, but he did not know that, and was exultant over his situation.

He was bunglingly made up as a centurion.

Thus, the antagonistic elements of the drama were thrown together, and of those in mask, Kean, Bradley and Johnson were not likely to be recognized if they tried to keep their identity secret.

Dancing began, but only one of the actors in the drama took part. Mrs. Brackett was in her glory, and did not intend to lose any part of the evening's amusement. She was a skillful dancer, and it was her intention to keep on the floor about all the time.

Bradley sought Thad Johnson's presence.

"How does it seem to be in Paradise?" he asked, ironically.

"This is glorious!" Thad declared. "I never seen the like! Did you?"

"Did I? Well, I should say so. I've moved in society in my day, old man; bang-up good society; and this isn't a circumstance to it. For a 'wayback blow-out' this is fair, but as to an average, it's crude—terribly so, Thad."

"Wish I could dance."

"Go in!"

"Not I!" wisely declared the big bravo.

"Electa Parsons is here."

"Ya-as; takin' good keer o' your Alice."

"She shall be mine before morning. Thus far, my scheme works well. I've heard several persons say that I am Kean."

"That's encouragin'."

"Yes; I'll fix ample guilt on him before morning."

"Are you sure he is the chap in Highland rig?"

"Yes. I wouldn't know him, but our tip was straight."

"Alice stays by her dad."

"He stays by her, you mean, but it will not last long. Brackett owes something to civility, and the other solid men of the town will gobble him up for weighty talk. When he leaves the girl's side, I shall get to work. As usual, Electa is a rock in the way, but she must be tipped over, so to speak."

"You ain't told me yer plan, yit."

"Thaddeus, when the original serpent wanted to make trouble in the world, whom did he get for his ally?"

Mr. Johnson was not any more of a Biblical scholar than he was an honest man; he gave it up, and said as much.

"A woman!" Nathan added, coolly. "That was policy, then, and it's policy in this generation. If you have a villainous scheme to work, get a woman for an ally; villainy comes natural to them."

"Strange you should like 'em so."

"My esteemed friend, if villainy is woman's birthright, folly is man's. All men are fools in some degree. I am one—hence, my fancy for a woman. But to resume: Marie, the charming French maid of Madam Brackett, is my ally."

"Does she know it?"

"Does she? Well, I should remark! It is all arranged, and she will help me in due time. Now, be off! Unknown as we are, we do not want to be too much together. It might tell against us."

"Kin I help you, boss?"

"You will have your part to play later. By the way, can you disguise your voice, and take that harsh grating out of it?"

"I kin try."

"Do so. There is a good deal of grizzly bear in your nature; you want to tame it. You may have to play a delicate part, presently."

They separated, and Nathan kept at a distance from those who would be most likely to recognize him. He had his plot all laid, but precipitation might ruin it. While the ball was in its first stages even Alice, though she did not dance, would not care to go away.

Whatever might be the sequel, the ball was thus far a success. The disguises, though usually crude and bungling, were noticeably good, and those who kept control of their voices were able to conceal their identity. Much uncertainty and amusement followed.

Presently a trim little woman tripped lightly to where Alice sat, with Electa standing guard over her like a warrior.

"Ah! mademoiselle!" cried the little woman, "is it not lovely?"

Alice easily recognized the voice of Marie, her step-mother's maid.

"The music is very fine, and they seem to be enjoying themselves," Miss Brackett replied.

"Ah! me; don't you wish you were among ze dancers?"

"That is impossible, you know."

Alice spoke quietly and philosophically, but Electa was not in that vein.

"Don't always be harpin' on things that brings up one's misfortin's!" she severely exclaimed.

"Never mind, Electa," Alice lightly returned.

"Marie means no harm. I cannot better anything by useless repinings over my misfortune. If I fail to see much that is worth seeing, I also lose much that might trouble me."

"Zat is ze true spirit!" Marie declared. "No von is more pained to think of ze trouble zat is yours, mademoiselle. Ah! is it not very warm here?"

"It is uncomfortable," Alice admitted.

"Why you not go to ze conservatory?"

"The wonders there would be lost upon me."

"But not ze fresh air. You look pale, mademoiselle. Vy not try ze promenade?"

Marie spoke with what seemed to be kind solicitude, and as evil chance would have it, her suggestion impressed Alice favorably.

"I do believe I will act upon your idea," she answered. "Come, Electa; let us go to the conservatory. At this early hour we shall find the place nearly, or quite, deserted."

Ordinarily, Electa would have approved of the idea, but, as Marie had first mentioned it, she stood as stiff as a ramrod when her young mistress arose.

"We ain't so sure o' that," she responded.

"Even if some one is there, it need not trouble us."

"The Reds may be thar!"

"Nonsense, Electa!"

"Or ze Roman senator," added Marie.

"What's he got ter do about it?" tartly asked Miss Parsons.

"Zey do say he ees Monsieur Garry Kean!"

Marie lowered her voice and pretended to be very secretive, but she watched the result closely. The opinion was general that the Roman was Kean, but the artful French girl wished to see if Alice was aware of the fact. The mask hid Miss Brackett's face, but Marie was satisfied: Alice had heard the prevailing rumor, and unless she was in Kean's confidence and knew that he was not the Roman, it was likely that she was similarly deceived.

The plot was beginning to work.

Leaning upon Electa's arm Alice began the journey, and as Abram Brackett was in another part of the room, he did not see her go. Marie flitted along on Alice's other side, ready to foil any possible obstacle to her plan.

"The conservatory," so called, was a pleasant adjunct of the City Hall. It had been planned and fitted up by a man of wealth who would have done other good things for the "city" had not death removed him prematurely. The conservatory was a garden in-doors. Trees, shrubs and plants grew in huge tubs, or were mounted on blocks, and the whole formed a very fair resemblance to what the name implied. Rustic benches were scattered about, and one might wander along the devious paths with neighbors close at hand, yet never see them unless they came face to face.

It was a pleasant place, and a favorite resort, yet Alice would have done well to avoid it that night.

Marie smiled evilly as they left the hall.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DEVOTEES OF AMBITION.

ELECTA looked around with grim disapproval when they entered the conservatory. It was a place of no mean pretensions, but she found no pleasure in it. There was enough to attract young, romantic persons, but the lights were not numerous enough to prevent dark recesses between the pots of shrubs, and these, she thought, might hide even more numerous lurking "Reds."

The good woman held her peace, however.

Marie was all life and animation. She chattered rapidly, commenting upon the resort, its attractions and its solitude, but finally an-

nounced that she must go back to the ball-room, to be at hand in case Mrs. Brackett wanted her.

She turned to go, but suddenly "caught her breath" with an audible gasp.

"Bless me, mademoiselle!" she cried, "the Roman senator is coming. I will get away!"

And she made good the threat by running off to the ball-room.

She had left food for thought. Blind Alice could not use her own eyes, but she had accepted the general verdict that the Roman was Garry Kean, and it threw her into a little flutter. Since her sudden illness she had not seen or heard from the ex-actor, and she could not avoid the impression that he was about to seek her company.

She both hoped for and dreaded this result. She had some fear that her note to him had been warmer than modesty would allow. It had been written at a time when she believed she was about to go away, perhaps never to see him again, and that occasion was different from meeting him alone.

The Roman approached, but not alone. He was accompanied by a short, awkward-looking man illy made up to represent a centurion.

In these men we recognize Bradley and Johnson, but their disguise was too perfect to be penetrated. Even Electa's sharp eyes were at fault, and, having observed the senator in conversation with the centurion, she had decided that the latter was English John.

The two men came up at once, and the senator bowed low.

"I crave your pardon, fair shepherdess," he said, "but may I ask if I am on the right road to Rome?"

The voice was not familiar, but that did not surprise Alice. The perfect change of tone, as she regarded it, rather awakened her admiration, and appeared to be in keeping with the ex-actor's profession.

"No senator should be ignorant of the road to Rome," she answered.

"Times have changed since the days of Julius Caesar."

"Was he your friend?"

The best I ever had."

"And what of Marc Antony?"

"He was Caesar's avenger—a noble man. Do not judge him by any strolling actor you may have seen."

Alice smiled brightly. As she thought that Garry Kean was speaking, and Garry had played Marc Antony, the pleasantry seemed very applicable.

"I have heard modern Antonys well spoken of."

"Only by poor judges."

The senator was more in earnest than he seemed, and he would gladly have put into his voice the hatred he felt for Kean, but he controlled himself and spoke lightly.

"Have Roman senators, as a whole, degenerated?" Alice asked.

"That is one on me, fair shepherdess. Being modest, I will not attempt to answer. But as to shepherd girls, there can be no difference of opinion."

"And all must think unfavorably?"

"Not so; indeed, you wrong the modern shepherdess."

The senator glanced quickly toward Electa and the centurion. The latter was doing his duty nobly. He, too, was acting the gallant, and not without success. Believing that she was talking with English John, Electa was gracious. Why not? John was a worthy man, and Miss Parsons was not the oldest lady in the world. Why should she not, on this evening of festivity, converse in a friendly way with a truly good man?

The senator lowered his voice.

"There is a rustic bench over yonder," he observed. "Will you sit down, shepherdess?"

Alice had some misgivings, but she did not utter them. She accepted the invitation, and they occupied the bench. It was a retired recess, with just such a mingling of light and shade as would have pleased a romantic couple, but all this was lost upon Nathan and Alice. He was full of evil plots, and her sightless eyes could not see the beautiful or the homely.

Bradley spoke eagerly.

"I have longed for this opportunity," he declared.

"Have you?"

"Indeed, I have. It is a long time since I saw you last."

"I have been ill."

"So I heard, and you have had my deepest sympathy."

"Thank you. You did not decide to leave the city?"

"I shall never do that while you are here."

"I should have gone only for my sudden illness; I was making preparations to start."

"To what do you attribute your illness?"

"I have no theory."

"Well, you are, most happily, fully recovered, so let us be content. Alice, the days are long when I do not see you. How will this end?"

"I don't know."

"Would I have any hope if I spoke to your father?"

"Not at present," Alice answered, hurriedly.

"You must trust to time to change his ideas."

"Is there not a better way?"

"What way?"

"You will not be angry if I suggest it?"

"I think not."

"Alice, I love you devotedly, and life without you can be no more than a dreary failure. Do not condemn me to long misery. You do not know what doubt and fear are mine, as I look upon you from a distance and see no hope in the future. There is a hope, if you will but grant it. Alice, other young couples have been obliged to resort to elopement!"

Miss Brackett started abruptly.

"Do not speak of that!" she exclaimed, pained surprise very perceptible in her voice.

"I see no other hope," Nathan gloomily asserted.

"That can never be."

"Alice, I did not think that of you!"

The plotter spoke in a voice of deep melancholy, but he had unconsciously made a mistake in carrying out his scheme. Believing that Kean had declared his love for Alice, and had been formally accepted, he acted upon that idea, and had actually proposed an elopement in a case where there had been no mutual understanding, whatever might be the intuitive perceptions.

Before Alice could answer his pathetic reproach there was a rustling of garments close at hand, and with a few casual remarks another couple occupied a bench near at hand—so near that, though a vine-covered trellis shut out all view, the two couples were practically side by side.

Alice held up her hand warningly; she had recognized one of the voices. The invisible persons spoke further, and even Nathan became conscious that they were Mrs. Abram Brackett and Colonel Yoke Norman.

The girl began to tremble. She dreaded her imperial step-mother, without fully understanding how the latter hated her, and would rather have been discovered by almost any one else. Mrs. Brackett would feel no sympathy for her. Alice kept her place, not daring to leave, lest the noise should cause investigation, and commanding her own companion by a gesture to be silent.

Their neighbors spoke, and every word was audible to Alice and Nathan.

"By Mars! it is good to get away from the ball-room!" declared the colonel, with a sigh.

"I thought you liked dancing," returned Mrs. Brackett.

"Ah! but there are better things!"

"Indeed!"

"What can compare with the company of a lovely woman?"

"Nonsense, colonel!" returned Mrs. Brackett, but her voice was not severe.

"Madam, you know how I adore you!"

"Soldiers and sailors are proverbially fickle."

"But not Kentucky gentlemen. Mrs. Brackett, the men of my State love as they live—for all time!"

"As gallant as ever, colonel!"

"As discerning as ever, madam. I am not blind. The charms of the fair sex appeal to my whole nature, and with the queen of women I know no emotion but happiness."

"More flattery!"

"I swear that I mean it, madam!"

Alice listened in dumfounded surprise. Here was the bachelor colonel making love to her step-mother, and Mrs. Brackett listened graciously, evidently enjoying the homage paid. She, however, did not forget business, if Norman did.

"You should think of grander things," she answered.

"What could be grander?"

"Ambition!"

"By Mars! I had forgotten that!"

"Do not forget again. You aspire to be mayor of this city, and I am your ally. Let us keep these facts in mind."

"My hopes waver."

"Why?"

"Elijah Nicholson has the inside track, and will surely be renominated, unless by some lucky chance, we run him off the track. Our one hope is to secure Abram Brackett's co-operation. You know what hope there is of that."

"Brackett is a clod!" declared Brackett's wife, tartly.

"You ought to be able to sway him."

"I have no influence with him."

"He is a brute!"

"You are right, colonel; that is what he is."

Alice grew cold with horror, but Mrs. Brackett went on:

"He is as destitute of the ordinary feelings of the human race as a rock. Ambition finds not the least place in his being. He would be a brick-layer and feel as much content as though he were a king. His harsh, imperious, icy nature is utterly repulsive. If he were a king, he would have all his courtiers angry with him in a week. He would not do one of them a favor, but would shower good things upon the beggars of the street. He believes that all men are equal, provided that they are honorable, as he calls it. Bah! I hate such views—such idiocy!"

The female Caesar beat her pretty foot impatiently upon the floor.

"Most unjust and unwise judge!" muttered the colonel.

"He cares only for his doll-faced girl."

"Alice is a clipper!"

"Why don't you go to her?" sharply demanded the lady of ambition.

"Dear madam, I never mistake a star for the glorious sun. Alice is a child. You, Mrs. Brackett, are the most glorious woman the world ever saw."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"THE CANKER OF AMBITIOUS THOUGHTS."

ALICE trembled and was pale with horror, but Nathan Bradley smiled sarcastically and was well satisfied. He cared not a fig how much Colonel Yoke Norman made love to Mrs. Brackett, and the secrets he was learning might yet be useful to him. In any case, this talk must have effect upon Alice, and he hoped it would so influence her that home would become distasteful, and make her reconciled to elopement.

"Colonel," replied Mrs. Brackett, with kind reproof, "let us have no frivolity. We were speaking of the mayor's office. We must secure it."

"Were you my wife," declared Norman, "I would poll every vote cast for mayor!"

"How?"

"You should charm them."

"Yet, I cannot even charm Brackett."

"He is a dolt!"

"He is a man of iron. Do not think that I have been false to the confidence you reposed in me. I have argued with the man, but he is without ambition."

"Why not threaten him?"

"Threaten him! Threaten Abram Brackett? Ye gods! colonel, one might as well threaten an iceberg. 'Stubborn' is a weak word to apply to the Iron Judge. A threat only makes his mulish qualities stand out more prominently, and that is superfluous. He is a hard man to manage."

"It is shameful that you are bound for life to such a brutal wretch."

"He is not brutal, colonel; no one could use me better. He is merely undemonstrative."

"He is brutal to overlook, and be indifferent to, charms like yours. Dear madam, fate is unjust. It links fire with ice, and expects the fire to submissively die out in an Arctic atmosphere. This is wrong—cruelly wrong. Madam, you should have been my wife!"

The Kentuckian waxed fervent, and endeavored to take Mrs. Brackett's hand. It was withdrawn from his reach. In justice to Mrs. Brackett, it should be said that she was not a woman without redeeming qualities. She did not care a penny for Norman, but her ambition pointed to political alliance with him, and she was vain enough to like compliments.

She answered his last words with a sigh and two low-murmured words:

"Happy lot!"

To say that Alice was horrified would but feebly express it. In her frank, straightforward nature there was no guile, and her limited experience had left her ignorant of the fact that there was in the world many a woman who indulged in flirtation, and yet had no desire to change her lot. Alice did not suspect that, on Mrs. Brackett's part, all this was empty talk, and was simply appalled to hear such language from her father's wife.

Nathan Bradley took it for what it was worth. He knew that Mrs. Brackett was too much a woman of the world to prefer the ungainly colonel to the Iron Judge; and knew that it was surface talk; but he saw how it affected Alice, and was pleased thereby.

On one point Alice and Bradley were in accord; both had begun to find the situation intolerable. She was anxious to be out of hearing of such iniquitous conversation, while Nathan wished to press his own suit.

They could not, however, talk or go away undetected.

Colonel Yoke Norman had been drinking heavily, and he was reckless. He betrayed the fact in his next words.

"Madam, fate was unkind to us."

"Fate is often unkind."

"Would we had met before your marriage!"

"The time is past."

"But the future is before us. If we were to leave Jack's Delight—"

He was treading on dangerous ground, and Mrs. Brackett promptly checked the flow of his words.

"I am too much in love with this city"—she hated the place—"to go away. Some day, no doubt, Judge Brackett will be mayor. At present, you are the favored of fortune; you must win the prize. I will throw all my influence for you."

"And Brackett?"

"Must be brought over somehow."

"How strange that so stupid a man should have such a charming wife!"

"Colonel, it requires intellect like yours to see such things. You are so discerning. No doubt there are many broken hearts in Ken-

tucky, caused by your cruelty, but don't—don't break any here in Idaho!"

"Madam, I swear—"

"Don't! Men are so rash with their vows; so inconstant in their loves. I would believe no man under oath except you, but I know you so well that there is a tender spot in my heart for you."

"Mrs. Brackett, I bless you! Most adorable of women, you put new life in a miserable man—"

The remainder of the sentence was unheard by Alice and Bradley. The female Caesar saw that her candidate for political honors was in a dangerous mood. The wine was in and the wit out, and his gallantry was too offensive. She arose and moved several steps away, but, when they came within sight of others, paused by a huge tropical shrub where, as she perceived, she could assume a striking attitude.

Alice breathed a tremulous sigh. She did not know that the Kentuckian was intoxicated, or that Mrs. Brackett was playing with him. In her ignorance of flirtations, the scene had been real—alarmingly, shockingly real.

"We are again alone," observed Nathan, greatly relieved. "We can again converse."

"Mr. Lawrence, I am sick at heart; I think I had better return to the ball-room."

"What you have heard has been unpleasant."

"It has, indeed."

"Miss Brackett, I shudder to think of you in the house with that woman!"

"I see her but rarely."

"You should see her less. Alice, give me the right to protect you! Go away with me, and let us be married, and then you will owe obedience to no one; be subject to no one's whims; and have no unpleasant persons about you."

"You forget my father."

"What of him?"

"He is the noblest of men."

"Then why is he so bitter against me?"

"He does not know you as I do."

"Nor will he get acquainted."

"Trust to time, Mr. Lawrence."

"Do you not know that we can win the case at one stroke, if we move boldly?"

"Mr. Lawrence, you pain me. No one ever had a more loving father than I, and I cannot do anything to give him pain. Perhaps if I had my sight I might see many things in a light different from that in which I now regard them. Be that as it may, I am not one fitted for bold—for reckless steps. You will excuse me, but I must positively decline to leave my father's house!"

The firm will of the Bracketts made itself felt in her manner and voice, but there was more. Not yet did she doubt that her companion was Garry Kean, and it was no idle remark when she said that she was pained. That she should be asked to elope without a previous formal declaration of love, was really remarkable, and she was disappointed in her lover. Garry Kean fell in her estimation—and that innocent gentleman had not addressed her that evening.

Nathan was not disguising his voice so well as at first, and her suspicions might have been aroused had it not been for her perturbed state of mind.

Mrs. Brackett's conversation had utterly upset her.

Bradley saw his schemes in danger, but he had something to fall back upon. If he could not induce Alice to elope with him, he would abduct her. He had plans all laid to that effect, and to connect Kean with the affair, he had dropped in the recess an article stolen from the ex-actor, while Marie was to swear she had seen them together.

The plotter could not make haste, and there were many obstacles to success. He wondered at Johnson's success in so long keeping Electa away, and feared that she would appear at any moment. Then, too, Mrs. Brackett and the colonel were still in sight.

To add to Nathan's perplexity, the judge's muscular form loomed up in the distance, but that dignitary paused beside his wife and the colonel.

He did not appear to be at all jealous, but he looked anxious and troubled.

"Where is Alice?" he asked.

"Safe," replied Mrs. Brackett, indifferently.

"Have you seen her?"

"Only a moment ago."

"Who was with her?"

"Electa."

The female Caesar was not speaking falsely without an object. She was indifferent as to Alice and wished to give Colonel Norman a chance to urge his plea for the Iron Judge's aid, as he had expressed a desire to do.

"Miss Alice was looking charming," the colonel declared.

"Did you see her also?" the judge asked.

"Oh! yes."

"Which way did she go?"

"She's sitting on some of these benches, I reckon."

"I will go and see," interrupted Mrs. Brackett. "Judge, kindly entertain the colonel for a moment, and I will find our Alice."

She flitted away, while the Kentuckian, to make sure of an audience, actually seized Brack-

ett by a button and proceeded to pour eloquence and whisky-fumes into the victim's face. He gained the desired hearing, but Brackett's expression was grim, and he did not long intend to be held at bay like a traveler in a road-agent's grasp.

Mrs. Brackett's only object was to get away, but she was not destined to escape new experiences. She had gone but a few yards when she encountered a slender little man in a very trim gondolier's garb—Elmer Nicholson, as she well knew.

He spoke quickly.

"Madam, can I have a word with you?"

"Say on," was her ungracious reply.

"Do you know the city election is near at hand?"

Mrs. Brackett looked at him suspiciously.

"I've heard so," she responded.

"I have come to beseech your aid."

"Mine? For whom? What can I do?"

"Much—everything. You are a clever woman—a deuced clever woman—and such a person can do much. I want you to help my father become mayor again!"

Mrs. Brackett was genuinely surprised. For a small affair, the Jack's Delight political pot was boiling tremendously. It looked as though all the city had gone mad over a paltry office. She was still suspicious; she began to fear that her own schemes had become known.

"Did your father send you?" she asked.

"No, madam."

"What do you care about the matter?"

"Is it nothing to be the son of the mayor?"

Elmer struck a would-be heroic attitude as he asked the question, and tried to convey some visible sense of the dignity he felt.

"But I am no politician."

"You helped my father a year ago."

"True."

"Help him now, and I shall regard it as a personal favor to me. I, madam, am now of man's estate, and life opens before me. The world is my oyster; I must open it. Perhaps you think I am young, but so were Napoleon, Washington and Andrew Jackson, in their youth."

"Go win your honors, young man—eclipse, if you can, the gentlemen just named; but don't seek to climb to giddy heights from your father's official chair."

"Madam! this is levity!" cried Elmer, much offended.

"It is business. I no longer dabble in politics. An unjust law, or rather, the lack of a just law, forbids me to vote. Why should I aid selfish politicians who will not allow me the privilege of casting a ballot?"

"Mrs. Brackett, give your aid this time, and I will throw all my influence toward giving you the right to vote. Even though all the rest of your sex be denied, you shall vote—I promise it!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

GARRY KEAN WANTS TO KNOW.

ONCE more young Nicholson struck a heroic attitude, and Mrs. Brackett's mask enabled her to smile as broadly as she saw fit without discovery. The idea of the feeble little man taking the cause of woman's suffrage upon his narrow shoulders was absurd.

"I never make bargains," the lady replied, coldly.

"Surely, there is nothing dishonorable about it?"

"Nothing whatever."

"The Nicholsons and the Bracketts," pursued Elmer, confidently, "ought to be allies. Fact is, I love Miss Brackett!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and by uniting our families, we could make an irresistible party, just as the Goths and Huns were in olden times. Let this alliance be made now. You help father to succeed himself as mayor, I will marry Alice, and we will all pull together."

"Has Miss Brackett promised to marry you?"

"N—no."

"Then my advice is, don't ask her. You are young yet, and a few years at school will benefit you. Don't seek to grapple with the great problems of life. Let more muscular men run political affairs. While I dislike to disappoint you by refusing my aid in your ambition, I must do so—emphatically!"

The lady spoke with emphasis equal to his choice of words. She was for the time the bitter enemy of Mayor Nicholson, and while his puny son did not appear to be a rock in the way of her own plans, it was just as well to deal severely with him at the start and crush his ambition.

Elmer flushed deeply. Weak he might be in many ways, but he was not dull enough of perception to fail to detect the contempt in the speaker's voice.

"You don't want to be too proud!" he cried. "I know something that would bring you down in the dust!"

"You talk wildly."

"I can act as well as talk. Some of the Brackett secrets are known to me, and unless I have respect shown me, out go those secrets broadcast!"

Mrs. Brackett began to be troubled. Had he been acting the listener?

"I never had a secret," she answered.

"It don't concern you."

"Oh, indeed!"

"It is that immaculate husband of yours!"

Mrs. Brackett's eyes glittered. Was there anything in the alleged secret? If so, could she worm it out of the youth?

"Judge Brackett never had a secret, sir."

"And never committed a crime, eh?"

"Never!"

"Ha, ha! We shall see. You may not be in his confidence—it is not likely you are—but I am in the secret. Ha! I'll show you, madam! How many wives has Abram Brackett had, how many were legal, and who is the legal one?"

The little man spoke with all the vindictiveness of a low nature, but the result was quite surprising. Agatha was ready to abuse her husband, herself, but this attack made her furious.

"You little wretch!" she exclaimed, "how dare you make such an infamous charge?"

"Don't call names!" retorted Elmer, drawing his slender figure up as much as possible.

"Don't you know that Abram Brackett is the most honorable of men?"

"That isn't saying much. Perhaps you don't know men, but I do. Honorable men! Bah! such a thing never was and never will be. Brackett has been a deuce of a chap, like all the rest of us young folks. Ask him how many more Mrs. Bracketts there are. Perhaps he can tell—I can't!"

"Boy," said Brackett's wife, with biting scorn, "if the man whom you traduce were here he would crush you!"

Elmer cast a wary glance around.

"That don't alter facts."

"You have spoken none."

"Madam, you can doubt my veracity if you wish, but I hold the honor of your family in my hands. The honor and happiness of the judge, of yourself, and of Alice are in my keeping. I have only to spread the secret to blast the Brackett reputation, and I'll do it if I'm not given notice. The price of my silence is, first, Alice's hand in marriage; secondly, your aid and Brackett's to re-elect my father as mayor!"

"Your statement is flimsy."

"Ask Judge Brackett if he remembers Saint Ledair. He took to matrimony as naturally as I do, and plunged into the sea while he was still a boy. At that time he had a father—another judge, by the way, and I guess he was one of iron—and he put his foot right down on Abram's entanglement. Faith! I suspect it would puzzle your husband to know just who was his legal wife, judge though he is."

Mrs. Brackett had recovered her calmness, and she was in a dangerous mood. Her contempt for Elmer was so great that she underrated his power of mischief, and imagined that it would be comparatively easy to crush him at the proper time; but he spoke so confidently that she began to believe in his alleged secret.

If she could only learn just what it was, what a glorious hold she would have upon the Iron Judge? In the first flush of this thought she forgot that the secret might bring disgrace to her, and aspired to learn it that she might hold it over Abram's head as a rod of terror, and compel him to aid her in the campaign for Colonel Yoke Norman's glory.

"How wildly you talk!" she murmured.

"I speak the truth."

"How came you to know any Brackett secret?"

"That part is immaterial."

"What proof have I?"

"My word!"

Mrs. Brackett smiled scornfully.

"I must have some tangible proof."

"What do you want?"

"Particulars."

"Of the secret?"

"Yes."

"Ha! ha! I am not to be caught that way; I am too old a bird. It is enough that I know the secret."

"Do you ask me to believe blindly?"

"I am not fool enough to give away my secret prematurely, but one thing I will say to you. Ask Brackett one question, and put it in these words: 'What has become of your wife of Saint Ledair?' Watch the effect, and, my word for it, you will see him grow as pale as a girl."

"You don't know the man."

"You don't know the secret!"

"Can't I induce you to tell it?"

"Madam, if you want a grip on the judge, you can get in this way: Go into the political campaign in earnest, aid my father faithfully, and when he is re-elected, I will tell you the secret so you can use it over Brackett's head. On the other hand, you can learn it by refusing to listen to me, for I'll tell every person in the city, and disgrace you all. Now, then, will you be my ally?"

How Mrs. Brackett hated the waspish little man then:

"I am out of politics," she answered.

"You must go in again."

The word "must" cut her deeply, but she saw the necessity of caution. She had begun to

be afraid of Elmer. No one is more dangerous than a vicious person, however weak may be his mind and body. The manly, open foe is always preferable to the furtive one.

"You must give me time," she replied.

"How much?"

"A week."

"Impossible."

"Three days, then."

Elmer meditated, and then slowly returned:

"I don't want to be severe on one who is to be my ally, and I'll do it. At the end of three days I shall come for my answer, and it must be ready. That's all for to-night. I must attend to other business. Madam, I wish you well, and hope we may never be enemies."

He bowed with extreme politeness, and then beat a somewhat unceremonious retreat.

On his way he passed a man in Highland costume, but gave him no particular notice. The Highlander, however, at once went to Mrs. Brackett's side.

"Excuse me," he said, hurriedly, "but where is Miss Brackett?"

The lady elevated her head superciliously.

"I am not her keeper."

"Believe me, I do not ask from any idle motive."

"And who are you, sir?"

"Hubert Lawrence!"

"Ah! Garry Kean wants to see Miss Brackett. What does that mean? As a mother—ahem!—I am anxious to know."

"I can tell you in few words. I learn that Miss Brackett is somewhere in the company of a man made up as a Roman senator. The opinion is general that said Roman is 'Garry Kean,' but that is false, as you can see. I suspect, however, that she may have been deceived, like others."

"And be in the Roman's company, thinking she is with you?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Lawrence," declared Cleopatra, playfully, "I am afraid you are jealous!"

"Madam, you tire my patience. I told you I did not speak from any idle motive. I suspect that the man who is masquerading as a Roman chose the disguise with the deliberate intention of passing for me, and that he is my enemy and Miss Brackett's. If so he is not a safe companion for her. He should be found, and, if he has any plot in mind, should be unmasked before he can execute it. I have Miss Brackett's safety in mind."

"Why don't you speak to the judge?"

"I would, if I could find him."

"He is not far away; come with me and I will aid you."

Mrs. Brackett was gracious, and she appeared to be solicitous, but, really, she was undisturbed. Her selfishness was as strong as ever, but it would not do to dally any longer. If harm came to Alice, the plotting woman would have good cause to fear the judge.

She had already spoken falsely to him, when she stated that she had seen Alice, and she must get out of that complication.

Followed by Garry, she hastened to where she had left Brackett, but he was no longer there. Both he and Colonel Yoke Norman had disappeared.

Mrs. Brackett began to be worried. She had thought to smooth over her fiction by pleading a mistake, but if anything serious happened before she could do this, the judge was not likely to be easily satisfied.

While she stood in irresolution, Electa came hurrying up, her face grim and troubled.

"I'd like to know where Alice is!" she declared.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ROMAN TANGLES THINGS UP.

KEAN turned upon her sharply.

"Don't you know where Alice is?"

"That I don't."

"What is your duty in her service?"

"Don't you talk nonsense!" retorted Electa, stoutly. "If you are an honest man—"

"I am Hubert Lawrence."

"Great land! ain't you the Roman thingum-jig?"

"The Roman was not I. Woman, I am afraid that Alice has been decoyed to peril. Was she with the Roman?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Right in that alcove, beyond you, but she ain't there now. She an' the Roman is missin'."

"This must be looked into!" declared Kean. "My presentiment of trouble was well founded. I will soon learn if she is about this place."

He hurried away, and Electa kept close to his side.

"Say, is English John Hyar, ter-night?" she asked.

"No."

"Oh! oh! I've be'n cruelly deceived."

"By whom?"

"Some scallawag who passed hisself off as English John."

"He was a tool of Nathan Bradley, no doubt. If Alice is gone, she has been abducted by that wretch!"

"I'll kill myself ef it's so!" affirmed Electa,

disconsolately. "I've be'n fooled an' made game on, an' I've be'n false ter my trust. I wish I lived in the Dark Ages when Joan Dorsey did, an' then I'd be took out an' be-headed. I ought ter be, I vum!"

"It is too late for regrets. Let us, rather, undo the mischief—if we can."

"Ef I git sight o' that centurium, I'll scratch his eyes out!"

It was no vain threat; Electa felt all that she uttered. Her fear for Alice's safety was only equalled by chagrin at the thought of how she had been deceived, and Thad Johnson could not afford to despise such an enemy.

As Electa had said, the alcove where Alice had been was vacant, and there was no sign of her or the Roman. Kean now exhibited good judgment. He realized that if Alice was still in the conservatory she was safe, and would be so as long as she remained, but that if Nathan Bradley had hostile intentions, it would be his plan to get her away from all her friends.

This he could do by the rear door, which opened to the outer air, and Garry went there at once.

He was greatly relieved to find a man on guard there, stationed to keep out uninvited guests, and, when questioned, he declared that no one had passed out.

Unless Bradley's plot was very elaborate, there was still hope.

"Electa," said the ex-actor, "will you remain here on watch, while I search further?"

"Will I? Young man, I should remark! Go about your search, an' ef the scallawags come this way, I'll put a mark on 'em they'll carry fur more than one day!"

Kean felt that he could trust the good woman thoroughly, and that she would be as good a guard as any man, so he waited no longer, but resumed the search of the conservatory.

In doing this he interrupted conversation between several young couples who were in tender mood, and thereby incurred their hostility, but nothing was allowed to interfere with his determination to make sure in all cases.

He had begun to despond when he again came in sight of the rear exit—and something more. A masked couple were moving toward that point, and they were a Roman senator and a shepherd girl.

The hour of triumph appeared to be at hand, and Garry hastened forward. The couple had already reached the door, but in their path stood Electa with head well elevated and arms akimbo—a veritable rock.

Her voice floated to Kean's hearing.

"No, you don't!" she declared. "You can't pass out byar without walkin' right over my dead, lifeless body. I'm willin' ter die in a good cause, like Joan Dorsey, but you can't make your game work even when I'm dead. Miss Alice, why don't you speak? Don't you know Electa?"

The shepherd girl was silent.

"Woman, let me pass!" ordered the Roman.

"No, I won't!"

"How dare you obstruct the way?"

"How dare you try sech a scheme!"

Garry hurried to the shepherd girl's side.

"Miss Brackett," he exclaimed, in a low voice, "you are being deceived. Your companion is not a friend; he is a dangerous enemy!"

"Scoundrel!" hissed the Roman, "stand aside, or I will have you thrown out of the building."

Kean started. The voice had awakened new suspicion.

"Sir, who are you?" he demanded, hurriedly.

"That is my business, not yours."

"I do not ask from any ordinary motive—"

"I do not care what your motive is!" was the hot reply. "Unless you go away I will knock you down!"

"Only tell me if this lady is Miss Brackett—"

"Sir," retorted the shepherdess, "it is none of your business who I am, and I will call an attendant—"

Electa threw up both hands in dismay. Her first suspicion had come when she heard the voice, and she had run her gaze hurriedly up and down the shepherdess's person. Consternation followed.

"Them ain't them!" cried the good woman, with utter disregard for grammar. "Tain't Alice! Oh! where is my poor lamb now?"

Garry Kean's eyes flashed, and, in defiance of the statement that he would be "knocked down" if he gave further offense, he grasped the Roman's arm in a hold that was painful.

"Whoever you are," he sternly exclaimed, "you and your companion wear a part of the disguises lately worn by those we seek. You are their confederates, but whether guilt attaches itself to you remains to be seen. If you uphold the plot of a villain you must take the consequences. We do not care a picayune who you are, but you must either tell what has become of those with whom you have partially exchanged disguises—or describe the disguises you have cast off—or you shall suffer the consequences of your guilt or stupidity. I command you, choose at once!"

These words were spoken with concentrated vehemence which made its mark. The doughty Roman who, a moment before had been going

to do such wonders with his fists, quailed and became as meek as a lamb.

"We don't want any trouble!" he declared.

"Then speak out!"

"We *did* exchange with another couple."

"What became of them?"

"I don't know."

"What were your disguises?"

"I was an Arab; this lady was a nun."

"Are you telling the truth?"

"I am; I swear it!"

"I seen folks dressed like that earlier in the evenin'," agreed Electa.

"So did I; but where are they now?"

"We left them near the fountain," explained the new Roman.

"Who were they?"

"I don't know. The man proposed the exchange for a joke—so he said; hang him!—saying we could greatly perplex those who thought they had recognized us."

"Have they left by this door?" Garry asked, of the guard.

"No."

"Then they must have returned to the ball-room; I am sure they are not in the conservatory. I will look in the former place."

He turned away, but just then Judge Brackett and his wife appeared. The latter had found her husband and given the alarm, and also lulled his suspicion by "explaining" her statement that she had seen Alice. It had been a mistake, she asserted, and she was "very sorry." She was crafty enough not to overdo the matter, and, thus far, her word was not doubted.

"Electa," exclaimed the judge, as she came up, "where is Alice?"

Poor Miss Parsons felt "as though she could sink," as she afterward expressed it, and she had barely life enough at command to point to Garry and, with another defiance of grammar, reply:

"I refer you to her!"

"And who is he?" Brackett demanded.

"My name is Hubert Lawrence," the ex-actor quietly explained.

A suspicious look appeared on the Iron Judge's face, but he was too deeply troubled to press hostilities then.

"Have you seen Miss Brackett?" he asked.

"I have not, but have been looking for her. I have reason to believe"—lowering his voice—"that she is in the company of Nathan Bradley, against her will."

"Why do you think that?"

"I overheard a bit of conversation between two masked persons."

"Bradley was not invited here."

"He came, nevertheless; and has been masquerading as a Roman senator."

Brackett glanced toward the new illustration of that role, but Kean took him by the arm.

"Sir, if you will defer further talk for the present, I think you will do Miss Brackett a favor. With your permission I will aid you, and the sooner we find her, the better it will be for her. Remember that her blindness is sadly against her."

"Come!" was Brackett's terse direction, as he turned away. "And now, sir, why do you think she is in that scoundrel's company?"

"I think it was because she did not suspect his identity," Garry answered, with some embarrassment.

"Should it prove true, I will break every bone in his miserable body!"

The judge spoke with the vehemence of an angry father, but close upon his words came the recollection of the secret which Bradley held—the secret which menaced and hampered him; which menaced Alice's happiness, too; which was like a millstone around his neck.

Did he dare to punish Nathan Bradley?

They entered the ball-room. Dancing was still going on, and the music and gayety grated on Brackett's nerves. Never an admirer of such scenes, he loathed them at that moment.

He and Garry separated at the door and each went a different way, looking carefully, but by agreement, met at the opposite end of the hall.

Neither had discovered Alice.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MISFORTUNE—MADE ALLIES.

"THIS is incomprehensible!" Brackett declared.

"I am afraid they have left the building."

"We must question the other doorkeepers," suggested the judge.

"A good idea, though it begins to look as though Bradley had formed an ingenious plan and carried it out successfully."

"My poor Alice!"

"Be of good cheer, sir. Vengeance can be as swift as villainy, and we will make Bradley sorry for his night's work."

The ex-actor spoke with a firmness which somewhat cheered the judge. He did not think then upon what peculiar footing misfortune had placed him and Kean; when Alice was in danger, he was ready to accept the aid of his worst enemy and be thankful for it.

The main entrance was reached, and the guard found on duty, upright and watchful as a soldier. He was questioned, but the old reply came.

Thus far, no one had left the building by his door, so neither the persons described nor any one else could have gone. Of that he was positive.

Kean had done the questioning, and had made his manner so matter-of-fact that no one suspected that trouble was afoot, but when they turned away, the judge's face was the picture of despair and wrath.

"Every person in the place shall unmask!" he declared, in an inexorable voice.

"I do not think that will do any good."

"Why not?"

"They have left the building!"

"Why do you think so?"

"Bradley was crafty enough to change their disguises once, but he could not keep that up long. They are not in the ball-room or the conservatory."

"And the doorkeepers assert that they have not gone out."

"They are wrong. I will not say that the men spoke falsely, for I do not think so. They have either been false to their trust, or have been hoodwinked. I assume that the latter case was true. Bradley had his ruffianly friend, Johnson, here, and it would not be hard for him to decoy the guard from the door and give Bradley a chance to pass out."

"But Alice would not go."

"Not unless led to do so by some plausible lie."

"You are right, sir, and I thank you for your timely suggestions. My own capacity for thought seems dulled, but I must cast off this apathy. It is time for action, and Nathan Bradley shall, as you say, bitterly repent this night's work!"

Through the speaker's mind flitted recollection of the secret which was like a millstone, but it found only passing quarters there. Garry spoke again, and to the point.

"Our next step should be investigation beyond the rear door. There the carriages are collected while waiting, and if a couple have passed out, the drivers must have seen them."

"That is sensible advice. Come on!"

With quick steps they returned to the conservatory, but only to leave it at once. Outside was quite a collection of carriages, the drivers of which were gathered in groups, talking and enjoying their pipes. Brackett was at once recognized, and his servant came forward.

"Job, how long have you been here?" the judge asked.

"All the time."

"Have you seen any one come out?—any person, or persons, in mask?"

"One couple went away, sir."

"Who were they?"

"We didn't know. The man was made up as an Arab, and the woman as a nun. They came from the conservatory."

"Where did they go?"

"They drove off in a carriage. Lew Potters was waiting for a job, and they hired his outfit and went away. At least, that's what we suppose, and Potters said he was waiting for a job, but there was no talk, as far as I could see, and he may have been engaged in advance."

That was what Garry Kean thought. He knew that Potters was one of the "Reds," and probably a devoted follower of Nathan Bradley. To the ex-actor it looked as though Nathan had carefully laid his plan and had Potters in waiting. In case his superior was successful, Potters had work to do; if the plot failed, there would be no great loss.

"Which way did they go?" he broke in.

"Yonder."

The driver pointed to the east—the most suggestive quarter possible. By that road, and by no other, could a carriage leave the valley.

"How long have they been gone?"

"Perhaps ten minutes."

"Job!" cried the judge, "mount to the box and drive us after that other carriage. Overtake it if you kill your horses!"

The peremptory order was enough to stir Job into immediate action. He wheeled around his horses, and, when the judge and Kean had entered, he gave the animals each a cut of the whip and sent them flying down the road, much to the wonder of the other drivers, who did not suspect the motives which led to the abrupt departure.

"Reckon the old man has set down on Job!" remarked another Jehu, carelessly.

Brackett and Garry were sitting side by side in the carriage.

"Young man," said the judge, "I want more light on this subject. How did my daughter ever happen to choose Bradley for a companion? She might as well have selected a tiger. Make all plain, for I am painfully anxious!"

The speaker could declare his state of mind, but Kean had to bear all in philosophical silence. He could not win Abram Brackett's good will by lamentations, but he might do so by means of decisive action. Neither could he confess that in all probability Alice had gone in Bradley's company because she mistook him for Garry Kean.

The only resort was to say that the leader of the Reds had undoubtedly been mistaken for a friend, and that was the explanation which Brackett received.

Job was sending his horses at a tremendous pace, though there was but little need of urging them after that one cut of the whip. They were spirited animals, and the indignity of a blow was not soon forgotten. They swept through and past the village at what looked like runaway speed.

"Are you armed?" Kean asked.

"No, sir."

"You may need a weapon yet. Here is a revolver, small but trustworthy."

Brackett received it gingerly.

"I do not believe in carrying such weapons, but this is an exceptional case. When we overtake Bradley, however, I am liable to ignore the revolver and throttle the scoundrel."

"He may have several Reds with him."

"That will only increase the number of our victims!"

The judge was all iron then. Whatever fears were tugging at his heart, he did not let them weaken him. On the contrary, he was a man of ice, but with a volcano's fire throbbing under his iron exterior.

Kean needed no assertion that they were bound to overtake the runaways, if they were on the same road. There was not another pair of horses belonging to the city that could cover ground at such a rate of speed. Objects by the way seemed to swim past dizzily, and the carriage bounced when it struck a stone, like a ship buffeting against the breakers.

The race was destined to be shorter than they had dared to hope. A sudden cry came from Job, and in a moment more the less elevated passengers caught sight of a second outfit ahead of them.

"Run them down!" uttered Brackett, in a steel-like voice.

Job was willing, and so were the horses, and the race began in earnest. The pursuers had been seen and the fugitives were doing their best, but the result was not long in doubt. The rear carriage gained, and gained fast.

As that in advance had a top it was impossible to say whether Alice was there, but that point would soon be settled.

Foot by foot the pursuers drew up until only a few yards separated the two carriages—then a man was suddenly seen to rise and make a leap from the foremost vehicle. He struck on his feet, but lost his balance and fell to the ground.

Not long was he down. He leaped up and made a dash for the rocks by the wayside, but a foe was quickly on his track.

Without a word Garry Kean took the same leap, and he did not fall. The runaway was clambering up the acclivity as fast as possible, but Garry went with speed superior to his.

Looking back, the ex-actor saw that both carriages had come to a halt, but he did not give up his purpose. His quarry was clambering desperately, but was no match for the agile pursuer. Garry saw his opportunity and, reaching out, seized a luckless, dangling foot. He pulled back smartly, and, in a moment more, had landed the man at his own feet like a fish.

Promptly Kean covered him with his revolver.

"Yield!" he cried, sternly.

The captive looked at him steadily.

"You can't scare me!" he sullenly replied, "but I am not on the fight. I surrender!"

"Mr. Nathan Bradley, I see!"

"At your service. What do you want?"

"Judge Brackett will tell you."

"I have no business with him."

"Well, he has business with you."

"Fix it as you will. I'll go down!"

The fellow's coolness was surprising, and Garry began to be troubled. Why should Bradley give up that for which he had worked so hard? Was there a new trick, yet to be discovered, which would prove disappointing to them?

Still covered by the revolver, Nathan set his face toward the road.

"There's trouble down below!" he nonchalantly observed.

This was the fact. A scuffle was going on there, and Kean could easily see that the second driver was defending his claim, and obstructing the progress of Brackett and Job to his carriage.

Nathan was the most obliging of captives, and he descended the ledge as cheerfully as though he were aiding a friend. Kean's suspicions increased; his belief became strong that the adventure was going to take an unexpected turn.

Just as they reached the road the affray there came to an end, and Job brought the rival Jehu to his knees with a well-directed blow. Brackett advanced toward the carriage, and was greeted by a feminine voice.

"*Mon Dieu!* Messieurs, you quarrel like cats and dogs!"

It was the voice, not of Alice, but of Marie, the French maid!

CHAPTER XXVII.

DONE BY A WOMAN'S TRICK.

JUDGE BRACKETT had already seen that the carriage had but one occupant, and as the French girl spoke, he started back in surprise.

Marie adjusted her skirts in complacent self-possession, and lightly added:

"Monsieur Judge, I shall thank you ver' heartily for your kindness!"

"Alice!" gasped Brackett. "Where is she?"

"At ze ball, to be sure."

"She is not there—"

"Ah! cannot you comprehend? Ze captain of ze Reds think he elope wiz ze heiress, but he make von grand meestake and elope wiz ze maid."

"Jig's up!" adled Bradley. "Don't you lie too fast, though, Frenchy; face the music and admit that we were off for an elopement. I know nothing about Miss Brackett."

"*Mon Dieu!*" how ze man do lie!" cried Marie, clasping her hands. "He think all ze time zat he have Mees Alice, and I fool him—oh! so grand!—but make one great meestake. Elope wiz you? May Heaven forbid!"

Brackett grasped her arm savagely.

"Tell me the truth, or you shall suffer!" he severely ordered. "Where is Alice?"

"Monsieur, I swear she is at ze ball. Bradley ask her to change her disguise, and I go apart wiz her to help, but I have her put on another mask and lead her to ze ball-room, while I put on ze nun's clothes and go wiz zis grand gentleman."

Garry Kean heard these words and believed. The girl's manner was one of candor, and her situation as Mrs. Brackett's maid was too valuable to allow of its being thrown away lightly. She exhibited a triumph which appeared genuine, and he suspected that the arch-plotter had been duped in turn.

Brackett was not so easily convinced.

"Did Bradley wish to elope with you?" he asked.

"*Mon Dieu!*—of course not. I am not ze heiress!"

"I will not dispute a lady," gracefully put in Nathan, but the judge ignored the remark.

"Do you mean to say that he came thus far with you and did not recognize you?"

"Zat ees ze fact," Marie replied. "Ze mask hide my face, and I pretend to be weak and faint, and not able to talk; and he never suspect ze truth until you have almost overtake us. Zen I tell him who I am, and he shoomp from ze carriage and try to run away."

"All this is still an enigma to me," the judge declared.

"I will explain," began Nathan.

"Silence!" commanded Brackett. "Stand there until I am ready to chastise you."

"You won't do it, sir," confidently asserted the plotter.

"I may have you arrested."

"You may manacle my limbs, but you can't bridle my tongue!"

The cool assertion had a meaning known only to the two men, and it accomplished its object—it reminded the judge of the millstone around his neck. The latter was silent, but Nathan added:

"I am ready to throw up the sponge. It was on the hooks for me to elope with the fair Marie, but she repudiates the bargain. That is enough for me; I want no more of it. Mademoiselle, I present to you assurance of my most distinguished consideration, but Cupid has sped an arrow fruitlessly."

"Saint Catherine! I know not what all those long words mean," Marie answered, "but beware how you slander me, brutel! I elope wiz you? Nevaire! nevaire! Say it again, and I will skre-vatch out your eyes. How dare you say such a thing? Scoundrel! Villain! Brute! Ruffian! Infamous monster!"

The fair daughter of France was in temper, and might have gone on with her epithets forever had not Brackett interrupted.

"Mr. Bradley, do you say that my daughter is at the ball-room?"

"I presume she is; I do not know."

"Will you remain in our company until the matter is settled?"

"Cheerfully."

"Then we will all ride back together."

Garry Kean was irritated. Unless the judge was playing a waiting game, Bradley bade fair to get off without punishment. This was bad; the fellow was guilty, and he ought to be dealt with rigorously. This could be done without recourse to law, or to Brackett's own muscles. Job was at hand with his whip, and if that whip was laid upon Nathan's back with force and conscientious repetition, it would just about even matters up. And then, again, if Job did not aspire to tackle the leader of the Reds, the judge had only to request the ex-actor to polish Nathan off—a very enjoyable task, and a consummation well deserved.

Kean did not expect to have the chance. He remembered what Elmer Nicholson had said about the secret hold Nathan had upon Brackett, and believed that he could see the reason of the Iron Judge's half-hearted course.

The carriages were turned around; Brackett and Bradley entered one, and Garry and Marie the other.

Marie was still in an angry mood.

"If ze judge shall believe zat liar I shall be in despair!" she asserted. "I haf told ze truth. Bradley tried to decoy Mees Alice away, and

she would have gone, not knowing who he was, but I put a stop to zat. He had told her zat ze Brackett carriage was at ze door, but when I went apart wiz her, to change her shepherd disguise for ze nun's, I told her zere was a change in ze plan, and eef she would go to ze ball-room, Electa would soon join her zere; and I led her to ze room, and left her zere. I thought it would be ze grand sport to deceive Bradley, and I enter ze carriage wiz him. Then he put his arm around my waist—oh! ze grand rascal!—and I pretend to be faint wiz illness, and he nevaire, nevaire discover hees mistake until I tell him of eet."

The girl spoke volubly, but with an appearance of sincerity, and Kean believed her. Not yet, however, could he understand Mario fully; there was something back of what she had revealed.

From accounts he had heard of the fair Marie he believed her to be vicious and unscrupulous to a certain degree, though by no means thoroughly evil. Neither did she have any love for Alice, if he was correctly informed.

Why, then, had she so heroically come to Alice's rescue?

The City Hall was reached, and Brackett sprung to the ground. Nathan readily agreed to remain in the hands of Kean and Job, and then the judge entered the building. He met Mrs. Brackett in the conservatory.

"Still looking for Alice?" the lady asked, graciously.

"I am told that she is here—"

"She is; she's safe in the ball-room, and in Electa's charge. Depend upon it, her grim old friend will stand between her and harm. Your child owes her escape to the good service of Marie, my maid. As there have been countless strange mistakes here, to-night, you will not be surprised to learn that Alice mistook Bradley for a friend. His conduct toward her was of the best, except that it seems he did actually try to decoy her away on the pretense that your carriage awaited her. I dare say you will chastise the man. Your daughter, however, is safe, and all's well that ends well."

Mrs. Brackett was about as voluble as Marie had been, and she, too, had a crooked trail to cover. If she had not been so indifferent, and falsely informed Brackett that she had "just seen" Alice, Bradley's plot would not have reached such a radical stage.

Being well aware that he could be a tiger where the girl was concerned, the female Caesar was anxious to win her husband's good will and lull possible suspicions.

Just then, the judge was not in a mood for analyzing obscure points.

"I will go to Alice," he answered. "Is—is she in a fairly tranquil mood?"

"Quite so. She is deeply troubled by her mistake, but, by my orders, the full truth has been kept from her. She does not suspect what an iniquitous plot was laid against her. I thought it best that she should not."

"You were right, Agatha, and I thank you heartily."

The speaker gave his wife a grateful glance, and then went on to the ball-room.

This time it was easy to find Alice. Masks and disguises had grown distasteful to her, and she had thrown them wholly aside. She sat at a retired point, her own incomparable self, with Electa by her side as grim, stern and severe as a statue. If any man who was not wanted should come near, Miss Parsons would make him the most repentant man in Jack's Delight.

Brackett advanced and spoke to his daughter.

He did not refer to the late trouble, but with a few adroit words obtained the assurance that all was well with her, and then added that, in a few minutes, he would come again to escort her to their carriage, as he wished to return home.

She acquiesced in all that he said, and appeared to be quite calm, but as she lifted her pretty refined face to his, there was perceptible upon it a shadow of trouble.

He believed that it was the result of her recent adventure. He was never more mistaken.

Chagrined as she was over her deception, the discovery had brought one happy result. The proposition to elope had dismayed her when she thought it made by Kean, but now he was cleared of the charge. Better that she should, by mistake, pass a period of time in Bradley's company, than that the ex-actor should so far fall in her estimation.

But one thing could not very well be explained away.

Mrs. Brackett's flirtation with Colonel Yoke Norman was fresh in Alice's mind, and it filled her with actual horror. The female Caesar had listened graciously to the bachelor politician, and had met his tender speeches in kind. If Alice had known that it was only a species of flirtation popular in many grades of society, her worst fears would have been quieted, though nothing, in her opinion, could excuse her father's wife for using such language to another man.

Ignorant of all this, the judge finished his errand and then sought the outer air again.

Confident that Brackett would not dare to molest him, Bradley stood with his hands in his pockets, calmly smoking a cigar.

"What's the good word?" he nonchalantly asked.

"Miss Brackett is found."

"I thought it would be O. K."

"You are at liberty to go."

"Thanks; I'm in no hurry."

The Iron Judge shot a menacing glance at the speaker. He had a strong desire to lay violent hands upon the fellow, and the cool, insolent reply had increased the desire, but he dared not press hostilities.

"As you wish," he returned, haughtily, and then bent his gaze upon Kean. "Mr. Lawrence," he added, "I owe you thanks for your valuable aid. Believe me, I fully appreciate it."

"You are quite welcome to all I have done, sir," the ex-actor courteously answered.

Bradley smiled sarcastically.

"The lion and the lamb lie down together," he muttered; but, except for a swift glance from Garry, the remark was ignored.

"I have not time to say more now, but I will endeavor to see you to-morrow, and express myself properly."

With these words he turned quickly and entered the conservatory.

"Marc Antony," observed Bradley, with a sneer, "you have struck a 'snap!'"

"If you have anything to say to me," steadily replied Kean, "I shall be pleased to see you to-morrow. If you have any bone to pick with me, do not confine your hostility to words. I am well aware that much of my own trouble at this place is due to you. Let skulking in the dark alone, henceforth. If you are a man, prove it by acting like one, not like a coward!"

"That's business!" Job ejaculated. "Now, we'll see whether Mister Bradley straddles your blind, or crawfishes!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BUSINESS MEETING OF THE REDS.

NATHAN was wise in his generation, and he ignored all this hostile talk.

"Other engagements will prevent my accepting your invitation, my good man," he responded, trying to keep up his careless air, "but I will not forget your good will. You shall hear from me in due time, and I will try to meet you on warm and—of course—friendly footing."

"He crawfishes!" muttered Job, in disgust.

Before more could be said the Brackett party came, with Alice upon her father's arm. It was early for Mrs. Brackett to leave, but she was not going to permit the digging of any pits under her feet. There would be an explanation when the family home was reached, and she wished to be on hand to add her statement.

Little did she suspect that Alice had overheard her conversation with Colonel Yoke Norman.

Both Kean and Bradley were ignored as the grand party made its way to the carriage, but this did not trouble the ex-actor. He had confidence in Alice, and that was enough.

Job received his passengers, mounted to the box and sent the horses down the street. There was a cloud of dust, and then one echo of the ball died away. Kean watched for a few moments, and when he turned, Nathan Bradley had disappeared.

Quietly Garry turned and walked homeward, and only the other drivers, who were a few yards distant, were left as the outside segment of the ball. The ex-actor went at once to English John's hut, and found that worthy carefully cleaning a revolver.

"Going on the war-path?" Kean inquired.

"I be."

"For what game?"

"Human!"

John squinted through the cylinder and then laid the weapon down.

"Garry, you've jest come from a scene o' festivity, an' I hate woundedly ter upset ye, but thar is high-jinks ahead."

"In what way?"

"The Reds hev got blood in their eye. It wa'n't no idle threat when they said they would rule this city or make Rome howl. Wal, the upper ten ain't knuckled under, an' they are liable ter know the result in a bad way."

"You talk in riddles. Explain!"

"I will. While you've be'n away, I've be'n lookin' about. It beats all creation how much thar is ter be seen in Shanty-town of a man keeps his eyes open. There's a pile ter be heerd, too. Moreover, this has be'n a right good night fur eyes an' ears. The Reds hev be'n up an' doin', an' thar has be'n whisperin's an' talkin's among 'em about things ter come. Garry, I s'pose you'd be s'prised ter know that they meet, ter-night, to lay plans fur a riot?"

"Nothing that those knaves may do will surprise me."

"They may s'prise themselves afore they are though. I hev heerd their whisperin's, an' I'm goin' ter attend their meetin'—not as a delegate, though; oh! great Lord, no! They wouldn't invite old English John!"

"I should say not."

"We don't invite small-pox, toothache, measles nor dyspepsy, but they come jest the same. I'm goin' to the Reds' war-dance, an' I ask you along. It's ter be held at the Bottle-without-a-Cork Saloon, the half-way house 'twixt

hyar an' the mines. Was Nate Bradley at the blow-out?"

"Yes."

"He's a wily rat!"

"What now?"

"Pard, the Reds contemplate seizin' the City Hall, stealin' all official papers an' et sattery—though what they want o' et sattery, I dunno—an' turnin' the buildin' inter a fort. Nate went ter the ball—he bribed another feller ter stay at home an' give him his card o' invite—he went ter study the place; see its weak p'int's an' strong ones; see how the Reds' kin git in, in case o' need, an' how they kin keep others out."

"John, if that fellow isn't squelched, there will be bloody times here yet."

"White an' Brackett ought ter set down on him."

Garry silently shook his head.

"Afeerd ter, be they?" added the miner.

"I know of no reason why White should be."

"But the judge is sorter on the anxious seat, Garry, I feel sorry fur that man. He is a man; the judge is; in spite o' his grim ways. He's white all through, an' it's a durned pity that a mean skunk has a holt on him."

The miner picked up his revolver again.

"Jewels like this may be trumps afore Jack's Delight gits red o' its attack of indigestion!" he added, as he resumed putting the revolver in condition.

Kean asked for and received further explanation of the new matter of interest.

English John occupied a peculiar position at the "city." His little shanty was right in the heart of the area given over almost exclusively to the Reds, and there he remained, though well aware that trouble might come at any moment. The Reds had no love for him. They knew he was not one of their kind, and would not have trusted him under any condition. They knew, too, that he was far above them in point of honor, but any contempt which they might have felt for his conscience was offset by his known courage.

Hence, he was tolerated as a neighbor, and all the more willingly because he was considered a man who would "mind his own business." He was indifferent to their likes and dislikes. Despite a sturdy independence which made itself felt at all times, he was not quarrelsome, and he kept the little hut, with the star-spangled flag floating over it, and lived serenely among the tough citizens of Shanty-town.

On this particular evening, being out of doors, he had heard "whisperings." More than that, he had listened to the words thus spoken, and, unsuspected by the Reds, had gained clew to the proposed meeting.

All this he explained at considerable length, and he and Garry, after discussing the matter in all its lights, decided to be present, as Bradley and Thad Johnson had at the ball—as uninvited guests.

Preparations were duly made; they left the hut and walked toward the rendezvous.

The Bottle-without-a-Cork Saloon was a large, barn-like structure which seemed to be a fit place for the meeting. Its night-trade was limited. Being the last place for a drink on the way to the mines, and the first when returning, it had a good general trade. Patrons were always there of an evening, but they were only a few Reds who lived at the outskirts of the city.

Practically, it was a fit place for plots and crimes, being at such a lonely place, with the barren hills just beyond, but thus far, its reputation had been far from bad.

When Kean and John approached it, not a light was to be seen. It was too late for regular customers, and the proprietor was too wise to deviate from his usual practice and have lights out that might cause investigation.

There would, however, be no trouble about entering. The building was so loosely put together that a novice would have as good chance as a professional cracksman.

Having gained a desired position, John left his ally and went forward to reconnoiter. He returned at the end of five minutes.

"We're early," he reported.

"Nobody there?"

"Not yet. The old man holds the fort alone. He has got things all arranged for them, though. One side is curtained off, so that the single lamp won't give out no betrayin' light. The pow-wow will be held in half-gloom, with a perfect sea o' blackness around. Jest the place fur spies ter sneak up an' bend their ears forruds ter listen."

"Don't you flatter yourself that they will dispense with all precaution!" Garry replied warningly.

"Nor be we goin' to. We'll play 'em the game, an' ef they win we won't yowl. Shall we go in?"

It was considered time for this step, and they went accordingly. The side-door of the saloon was found unfastened, as it had been when John was there, and they went in quietly. The proprietor, a fat, ponderous man, was dimly visible at the further end of the long room, but his back was toward them.

They began to walk carefully to the hiding-place selected by the miner. The darkness was then both for and against them—it concealed them, and also prevented them from making

sure whether any obstacles were in the way; but due care and patience enabled them to pass the intervening space in safety.

Once at the end of the journey they looked for a place of concealment. Ordinarily this would not have been hard to find, for empty barrels and boxes were there in abundance, but whether they would prove effective on this occasion all depended upon what precautions the Reds took.

Kean found a recess behind two barrels and crouched down there, observing that he could look between them, at the top, and see all that was done; while English John went a step further and crawled under an empty box.

They had gained cover none too soon. Only a few minutes had passed when there was a sound from the lower end of the saloon; the proprietor went that way; and then returned with four men.

As they came into the light it was easy to recognize two of them as Nathan Bradley and Thad Johnson.

"All well Pfaff?" asked the leader of the Reds.

"All was lovely."

"How long since any one was in?"

"Two hours, sure."

"Good! Now, go back to the door and stand guard. Remember that we want but two more men; and that they are Reese and Cooney. If any one else tries to enter, shoot him!"

"No, no; I keeps him owt."

"Do so, or somebody else will shoot him. A new era has dawned here, and no more dilatory action will be allowed. The Reds are in motion, and the penalty of opposing them is—death!"

Nathan caught up one of a pack of cards on the table, flung it down again and then drove his long-bladed knife through the heart of the inoffensive jack of spades which adorned the pasteboard.

"So perish the enemies of the Reds!" he harshly added.

"Gre-vait Scott! I wouldn't like to have the ill-will of your barty!" asserted Pfaff.

"We rule from this hour, and he who is not with us will never get a coffin. Bring us some beer, and let us drink this toast: 'Death to all our foes!'"

CHAPTER XXIX.

ENGLISH JOHN GETS BOXED UP.

THE toast created enthusiasm in the breasts of Thad Johnson and the other Reds, and the order for beer had a corresponding effect upon the saloon-keeper, so there was great zeal both in the drawing and drinking of the beverage.

When it was done, Pfaff waddled to the side door to stand guard, while Nathan continued to talk to his men in a florid, vicious way. The blandness he had shown at the City Hall was wholly gone—he had been signally defeated, and all the evil passions of his nature were aroused.

Until that night, with the duplicity of villainy, he had never been sure that he would aid the Reds in the sanguinary "resolutions" passed at their meeting. His first consideration was for himself, and his ruling passion was to win Alice Brackett. Failure had met his efforts, and, like a maddened tiger, he was now ready to plunge Jack's Delight into a veritable reign of terror.

All this was of interest to Garry Kean and English John, but it did not serve to make their position pleasant. They were within the enemy's council-house, and could not withdraw unseen; they must remain, even though they had listened to such an ominous toast.

Worst of all, there was no empty talk about it; Nathan meant all that he said, and would gladly dispose of any spy who menaced his schemes.

It was to be hoped that the spies would not be discovered.

The other Reds soon arrived, and then the door was secured and all was ready for the conference.

"Gentlemen," Bradley began, in short, decisive words, "we are here for business, and I hope every man is prepared to back up what we do."

"We be," agreed a red-bearded man.

"Bet yer life!" added Thad Johnson.

"You know what the trouble is about. The aristocracy want to run this city, and one-third of the citizens are ignored. Why, we might as well be at the North Pole, so far as our voice in city affairs is concerned."

"We vote, but—"

"But what?" savagely interrupted Nathan, bending a ferocious glance upon the red-bearded man.

"But it's a waste o' time."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"You didn't give me time."

"We won't quarrel," affirmed Bradley, blissfully unconscious of the fact that he was, himself, the only man who had a desire to quarrel. "Yes, we vote; but we don't get the spoils. What one of us has got anything under Elijah Nicholson's reign?"

"Nobody!" roared Thad Johnson, slashing the table with his bowie-knife.

"It's an outrage!" Bradley declared. "The Reds are out in the cold: the Blacks have all the booty, booty and glory."

Each and all of the delegates heard in sym-

pathy, and they lifted up their voices and proclaimed that their wrongs were such that human endurance had been tried, overpowered and torn all to pieces.

"A few days ago," pursued Nathan, "we met and, after discussing the matter, decided to ask the aid of Judge Abram Brackett in our effort to get recognition. We drew up a respectful petition and carried it to him. What was the result?"

"We nigh about got kicked out o' the house!" growled Thad Johnson.

"We were refused—we, the strong-armed, long-suffering, down-trodden citizens of Jack's Delight!"

Nathan was growing more florid, and working his hearers up to the boiling pitch, but one of them did not like his slow way of getting at the alleged facts.

"Come ter the pint!" that man requested. "We hev tried ter git outside help, an' failed. Now we propose ter help ourselves. Bullets, not ballots, must give us our rights. We ain't sech clams as ter sit down an' let the poperlarity trample on us."

"Right!" declared Nathan. "Why should the upper ten get all the good things here? Are they more capable of ruling?"

"No!" cried the Reds, in chorus.

"Are they more respectable?"

"No!"

"Are they more honest?"

"No!"

"Are they harder workers?"

"No!"

"They work their jaws, same's we do ourn," added Johnson, with refreshing candor; it being a fact that while some of the Reds were genuine, hard-working miners, not one of their leaders ever did any labor.

Thad received a scowl from his superior, who then went on briskly:

"Now to business, men. We are going to capture this town, and then run it. Three or four things must mark our uprising. First, the houses of Mayor Nicholson and Judge Brackett must be burned to the ground! These men, especially Brackett, have been our worst enemies. We must burn them out, and then run them out of town."

"Wouldn't it be wal to flog 'em?" Thad asked.

"We will see. At the same time that a portion of our force does this work, the majority must attack the City Hall. Thad and I have carefully sized up the place, to-night, and find that it is just what we want. By capturing it we shall get all of the official papers, and quite a collection of rifles which are stored there. Once in our possession, we must make it our fort—it must be held at all hazards. If we easily subdue the whole town there will be no further fighting, but if there should be, we can hold the City Hall against all comers."

"And pick them off, one at a time."

"Just so. Of course our campaign is not going to be a goody-goody one, but war to the bitter end!"

The Reds approved rapturously. All this was in the line of their desires. It just harmonized with their own views, but they looked to Bradley for fine details. He was a born schemer, while they were better calculated to fight than to appear as diplomatic stars.

Garry Kean listened to this conversation with a lively realization of its importance. The Reds were terribly in earnest, and would surely begin a reign of terror if not checked in their murderous plan. They were not, as they claimed, a party of honest men, smarting under wrongs; they were lawless ruffians who were greedy for plunder. Neither was their war one of the poor against the rich. Three-fifths of the opposite party were laboring men, but they were arrayed against the Reds as honest men usually are against knaves.

The consultation continued, and Bradley enlarged upon his plan without materially adding to it, but through all ran one conspicuous element—his hatred for Judge Brackett.

Nicholson, Norman, and the other leaders, were classed as a whole, but the judge came in for constant abuse, and it was plain that Bradley was so bitterly incensed against him that no pains, or plots, would be spared to crush him.

Upon the Brackett family, then, would fall the worst effects of the contemplated riot.

Business was over, at last, and more beer was ordered. Nathan settled back in his chair in sullen silence, while his followers talked, smoked and enjoyed themselves.

Kean and English John had learned all that they came for, and were ready to go away, but to leave undiscovered was out of the question while the Reds remained. The situation did not change for half an hour, but at the end of that time Nathan abruptly rose.

"Boys, you shall receive orders from me from time to time," he announced, "but I have no more to say now. I'm going home."

"Me, too," Thad agreed.

All of the Reds started to their feet with one exception.

"It's 'most mornin'," observed that person, yawning. "Say, Pfaff, can't I sleep on the floor, lyar?"

Two of his companions put in the same plea, and as the saloon-keeper did not want to offend such valuable customers, there was no objection. The Reds divided, and only three were left in the saloon.

The ex-actor beheld this new departure with considerable disgust, for it seemed that they were not to get rid of their neighbors, and the situation was soon rendered more unfavorable. Pfaff brought several blankets, and they were accepted with pleasure by the new lodgers.

The first of these promptly rolled the blanket around him and lay down on the floor, but the others were more fastidious. One took to the table, while the other lay down on the top of an empty box.

Now, this last movement concerned our friends more than a little, for—English John was under the box!

By an adverse chance the miner's refuge had invited the Red's attention, and when he lay down, he made John a prisoner.

The light still burned dimly on the table, and Garry Kean peered out in perplexity. There was no sign of the miner, but there John certainly was. How was he to get out?

Kean had so long been crouched down behind the barrels that his joints were stiff and clumsy, and his opinion of the men would not have been favorable, if expressed. What the imprisoned miner thought was to be inferred, rather than known, but Garry found himself wondering whether there was sufficient air under the box.

Certainly, there was no audible stir there.

Silence reigned in the saloon. Pfaff had gone to a remote part of the place, and the Reds were making the most of their brief chance to rest. They soon began to breathe heavily, and, to all appearances, were asleep.

Kean did not feel in that mood. Of course he and English John must escape before day dawned, or meet with discovery which would tell the conspirators that their plans had been overheard. On the other hand, they were liable to meet with just as much exposure in making their exit before that time.

All was clear for Garry to steal out, but not so with the miner. His box was held down by the weight of a healthy man, and he could not, one would suppose, be dislodged without being awakened. No conference could take place between the adventurers, and as John had had far more experience in wild scenes than he, the ex-actor was content to wait, watch the box and see what his friend would do about it.

Time passed. The silence in the big room was painful to Garry, broken as it was only by the breathing of the Reds. The ex-actor bore them no love for their notion of sleeping there, and would have liked to go out and wreak his wrath upon them.

Not being able to do this, and keep up the desired secrecy, he only crouched behind the barrels and deplored the ill-luck which had come to him and John.

His gaze had wandered, but it drifted back to the box for the hundredth time.

At last there was something to see besides the bare boards and the heavy-breathing Red.

One side of the box had been slightly lifted, and through the aperture thus made the nose and eye of the miner were to be seen, like those of an animal peering out of its den. English John smiled slightly, and one of his fingers appeared and waved a pantomimic warning.

Then he settled back, and the side of the box was slowly and silently raised higher.

Garry comprehended his plan. Like his ally, John realized the importance of getting away without alarming the Reds, if such a thing were possible. It did not seem possible; that John could get out of the box, and not awaken the man on top of it, appeared almost out of the question.

Higher rose the box, and the miner crawled forth until his head was clear. The box rested upon his broad shoulders. The Red slept on.

John beckoned, and the motion sent Garry to his side.

"Raise her up slow an' keerful!" the prisoner whispered.

Kean obeyed. The weight did not trouble him, and he soon had room enough for his friend to crawl up. This, however, almost stood the Red upon his feet, and Garry expected every moment to see him slide off and awaken.

The miner lost no time. He crawled like an expert, and, in a short time, was clear of his late prison. With a sigh of relief the younger man lowered the box—and still all of the Reds slept on.

Not a word was spoken, but the adventurers turned and glided across the floor. They had news of the contemplated riot, and if they could escape without having the roughs suspect that spies had been near, they would be able to warn Abram Brackett and the other officers of law.

CHAPTER XXX.

TROUBLESOME RATS.

THE following morning Judge Brackett walked to the stable back of his house. He had gone to see his servant, for whom he had an order, but found, instead, the magnificent creature who steered Mrs. Brackett's carriage through the streets of Jack's Delight. He was magnificent no longer. His high hat, his awe-inspiring

coat, and his glittering buttons were laid aside, and all that remained of his superb grandeur was his mutton-chop whiskers and a brogue.

Clad in plain stable-garments, the wonderful statue looked so much like a common man that no millionaire would have been afraid to address him familiarly, and even a small boy might have ventured a respectful bow.

"Where is Job?" Brackett asked, abruptly.

"He's gone ter de village, 'sor," was the respectful reply, for, grand as the statue was, he knew whence came his money.

"How are the horses to-day?"

"All right, 'sor."

Brackett looked around and nodded approvingly as he saw how neat the stable was, but his attention became fixed as he saw something in a small box.

"What is that?" he asked.

"It's arsenic, 'sor."

"Arsenic! What are you doing with it?"

"Oi am goin' to fade it ter de rats."

"We have rats here, then?"

"They are gittin' dhat thick an' bowld dat they bid to carry off de harses' fate ef we don't stop thim. It's a misch'avour lot they are, entirely."

"Where did you get that arsenic?"

"From Mrs. Brackett, yer Honor."

"From Mrs. Brackett!"

"Yis; yer Honor."

"How was that?"

"Why, 'sor, Oi knowed nothing else w'u'd cl'ane 'em out so complately, an' Oi asked her w'u'd she give me some, an' Oi rec'aved it ackardin'. She towld me not to mention de mather, an' as Oi prasume she has some good r'ason, not a sowl shall hear of it."

The magnificent man was smiling and doing his best to be agreeable, and, never suspecting that he might be "putting his foot in it," he failed to study his employer's expression. Had he done so, he would have been surprised to see what was revealed there.

"You say you asked her for the arsenic?"

"Yes, 'sor."

"How did you know she had any?"

"Oh! Oi brought it to her."

"From where?"

"The Expriss artifice at Gold-Bug."

"When?"

"Several wakes ago—Oi don't jestly know whin'."

"You say you bought her some arsenic from Gold-Bug," pursued Brackett, holding stubbornly to the subject, but making his manner careless. "How do you know you did? Explain!"

"Well, 'sor, you may remimber the day last spring whin I went to Gold-Bug av an arrant, an' broke down on me way home, an' was out so late?"

"I do."

"Oi went for Mrs. Brackett, an' she towld me to get a package at dhe Expriss office. Oi got it all right, but on me way home I broke down in de mountains, in de darrak. Oi could till what de mather was, an' knew Oi could fix it ef Oi could get a loight, but Oi had only wan match, an' de wind was blowin' a gale. Oi got a pine splinter, but was so afeerd Oi would lose me loight that I stripped arf de paper from de Expriss package, an' used it to make a sure job. Oi did it, too, an' came out all roight, but when Oi tuk off de paper Oi found a small box in me hand wid a label on it which said: 'ARSENIC—DEADLY POISON!' Well, 'sor, Oi handled it wid care afther that, an' was roight glad to get rid ave it; but Mrs. Brackett laughed whin Oi towld her so. She said it was a very good friend, at toimes, and that Oi w'u'd see there w'u'd be less rats around afther awhile."

Abram Brackett had turned and was looking out of the window.

"Exactly," he put in, as the servant paused.

"So, yer Honor, Oi knew where to go whin dhe rats got into dhe stable, an' Oi wint an' borrowed ave her. She gave this to me, but towld me not to mention it, an' begorra! Oi won't!"

"That is right," slowly commented the judge.

"Has Mrs. Brackett got rid ave all dhe rats in the house, 'sor?"

"I think there are still two or three that trouble her," answered Brackett, with a significance which the coachman did not suspect.

"Why don't she poison thim?"

"Perhaps she will."

"If it's anny good, Oi shall clear thim from de stable."

The judge turned away from the window.

"One word of advice to you, Bartholomew!"

"Pl'ase sp'oke out, yer Honor."

"Whenever you set out to clean out trouble-some rats, don't let the rats discern your intentions!"

"Eh, 'sor?"

"Be shrewd, for no rat likes arsenic as a steady diet, and they may rebel if they understand your game!"

With these words Brackett walked away abruptly, leaving Bartholomew looking after him in perplexity.

"Begorra, Oi don't fully understhand now but Oi presume the judge is in high spirits an' wanted his joke."

This theory was not in keeping with the judge's expression as he stalked rapidly from the stable to the house. His powerful face was grim, stern and forbidding, and one of the female servants whom he encountered looked at him in awe and fear, and then shivered as he passed by her.

He did not pause until he had reached his private room and locked himself in. Then he sat down, and new lines and shadows appeared in his face.

The late incident had startled him.

Alice had been mysteriously ill, and Doctor Crandall had expressed the fear that the trouble might have been the result of arsenical poison, the deadly drug having been met so promptly and effectually as to have overcome the usual fatal consequences. Every day a decisive report was expected from Boise City which would state definitely whether poison had been used, and this fact had been so much in his mind that it was well conditioned for the scene last described.

There had really been arsenic in the house at the time of Alice's illness.

Doctor Crandall had asked questions on this point, but without any further result than to awaken certain speculations in the judge's mind. Later came Mrs. Brackett's prophecy that unless Alice was carefully looked to she might not long survive, on account of physical weakness—something which, her father knew, did not exist.

Now, what about the arsenic?

Why had Mrs. Brackett obtained it?

The judge had never heard rats in the house, though, if they were in the stable, they might be in the house also. But that Mrs. Brackett would concern herself with rats in the house, in the stable, in-doors, out-doors, or elsewhere, was absurd. She was mistress of the Brackett residence, and occasionally made her authority felt with a vengeance, but when it came to looking to minor details, like the management of kitchen, chamber or cellar, there her work was unknown.

If the parlor and her own room were kept in good condition she regarded the house as well managed, and dirt might have run riot in the kitchen, water in the cellar and rats everywhere and she would have been ignorant of the fact—unless she chanced to hear the rats.

Domestic Mrs. Brackett was not and never had been, and to infer that she had been making a campaign, secret or open, against the rodents, was something the judge could not believe.

Why, then, had she wanted the arsenic?

And what use had she made of it?

Abruptly the judge arose and began to pace the room. At one moment he was tempted to summon his wife and demand an explanation, but caution prevailed. If she had allowed her well-known dislike of Alice to carry her so far as to make her a criminal, her mere detection and expulsion from the house would not satisfy him. He had passively borne her indifference, and had gone his way while she went hers, and never gave outward signs of irritation, but the moment that Alice was menaced, the lion was aroused.

How should she be protected?

Ideas flashed through his mind, but they were vague and disconnected. He had an impression that his proper course was to watch his wife, and, if she was engaged in guilty work trap her. But that would require time, and he had no crafty plan ready just then.

"What a flock of vultures men and women are!" he muttered, in bitter scorn. "All are selfish, corrupt, criminal! Would to Heaven I were free to deal with the schemers here as I wish. If they menaced me in any way save through Alice, there would be a marked thinning out of the evil element before many nights would pass. As it is, they are goading me into a dangerous mood. They call me the Iron Judge, yet think to buffet me about like a football. I wish I was free to deal with them as I could wish!"

Stern became his face, and his anger burned strongly against Nathan Bradley. How was the man to be met? The expedient of sending Alice out of town had been thwarted by her sudden illness, and now it was thought of no longer. He did not dare to leave her out of his sight.

A knock sounded at the door, and a servant appeared to announce English John. Brackett directed that he be admitted at once, and the miner was soon in the room.

"Hope I don't intrude, jedge," was his greeting.

"Not at all, sir. You represent a class of men all too few in number here—you are an honest man. Sit down and make yourself at home."

"I've come ter bring news, jedge!"

"Of what?"

"Garry Kean has diskivered that there is a monstrous plot afoot hyar in the city."

"Then why has he not come to tell me himself?"

"Garry is bashful, jedge!"

The miner shook his grizzled head soberly, as though the ex-actor's bashfulness was a very melancholy fact.

"What is the plot of which you speak?"

"The Reds are durnedly put out an' wrathy

over your refusal ter give 'em a lift in politics, an' they ain't goin' ter fool away no more time on pertitions. They will vote, but their ballots will be o' lead. Thar's a riot on foot, jedge!"

Brackett did not evince any surprise at this news.

"Led by Bradley, I presume?"

"You presume jest right. But that ain't all. They mean ter seize the City Hall, git the weepens stored thar, hold the place as a fort, an' raise Cain outside. That ain't the worst on't; they've got a few men marked fur destruction, an' you're one on 'em. They perpose ter burn your house. What they'll do with you ain't sartain, but Bradley's temper is all up ag'in' you, an' ef he has his way, you'll be lucky ter git out on't alive."

"How did you learn this?"

The miner explained. He had come there with the fixed intention of giving Garry Kean all the credit, but after floundering around considerably, he told a plain story, keeping back nothing.

Brackett listened with unwavering calmness.

"I am not surprised," he commented. "The leader of the Reds is capable of anything, and his ruffians will follow him eagerly. My good sir, I thank you for this warning; it will result in the saving of the town. The Reds shall be met in a way they will not like. I am sure we can depend upon your aid?"

"Bet yer life, jedge!—me an' Garry Kean."

"Your friend shall not be overlooked. He seems to be—" the judge hesitated for a moment, "a worthy young man, and all such are very welcome under our banner."

"Garry is white, clean through!" John asserted, with great enthusiasm.

"You will please thank him for me."

"So I will, jedge, an' when the crisis comes, you'll find him all thar. Thar is bound ter be some monstrous hard fightin', an' you'll find Garry a Man with Backbone, in the full sense. Yes, sir!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE AUDACITY OF DECEIT.

WHILE the judge was closeted with English John there was another visitor at the Brackett house. Alice had gone to the parlor, but she did not know that a caller was at hand until the room was entered. Her ears were very quick, and she at once suspected that some one not a member of the household was present. She started toward the door, but Mrs. Brackett's voice sounded in the sweetest key imaginable:

"Alice, Colonel Norman is here!"

The announcement was like a bombshell. Alice had not forgotten the conversation in the conservatory, and the knowledge that the Kentuckian had actually come to the house threw her into confusion.

"I am charmed to meet Miss Brackett," declared Norman, in a deep base.

There was no reply, and Alice continued her excited effort to reach the door until she actually found herself stopped by Mrs. Brackett's hand.

"Did you not hear the colonel's remark?" the elder lady demanded, her voice not wholly pleasant.

"Yes," faltered the girl, "and I thank him; but I must go."

"Go? Why?"

"I am weary."

It was the first excuse which occurred to her, and she realized how poor it was, as soon as it was spoken.

"By Mars! but her bright eyes belie it!" Norman asserted.

Mrs. Brackett was not slow-witted. Ever since the time at the ball when it was made known to her that, during some part of the evening, Alice and Bradley had occupied a recess in the conservatory next to the one in which she had permitted Colonel Yoke Norman to talk nonsense to her, she had been mentally inquiring whether Alice's ears had drank in delicate secrets. When, on the present occasion, she announced the Kentuckian's presence, she believed that she had her answer. Alice had changed color and shown confusion; had really seemed startled.

The female Caesar's resolution was at once taken; she determined to keep her step-daughter in the room.

She set about it as only a crafty woman could.

"My dear, let my age and wisdom speak for you. Your mode of life is wrong; nothing wearies one so much as doing nothing; no one thing can so age a person as solitude. You are dull, gloomy. Do you not know the remedy? It is simple. Lively company will cure the mind most diseased."

"True as the Bible," Norman agreed—"in the case of ladies. For men, blue-grass whisky and a hoss-trot makes a powerful appetizer!"

"For shame, colonel!" cried Mrs. Brackett, lightly. "Do you not know all ladies are prohibitionists?"

"Amend the statement, my dear madam, and say that the class you mention is made up of folks too weak-headed themselves to drink, but just strong enough to determine that other folks

shall not do what they *can't* do. When a small boy is chastised by his father he will go out and abuse the household cat; when a man, or woman, can't run all the world, he will join the prohibition party, set up on his hind legs and howl like thunder!"

The colonel was loyal to his State, and delivered his oration on principle, but it had one good effect; it gave Alice time to grow calm, and she began to believe that she did not wish to leave the room. Her father was not present, and it would be well to have a check upon the tongues of her present companions.

"Favor us by remaining, Alice," caressingly added Mrs. Brackett.

"By all means," supplemented Norman.

"Thank you; I will!" Alice calmly returned.

Her sudden change of manner staggered the Kentuckian, who did not know of Agatha's suspicions, but he imputed it to the variable temper of the fair sex, and very ostentatiously aided Alice to find a chair.

This disgusted her, for she believed him to be seeking her favor so that his secret would be safe, but she was in error; it was only sincere attention from a man bred to be polite, urged on by his admiration for Alice, personally.

"My dear Miss Brackett," he exclaimed, "the ball last night was a grand success!"

"How many conquests did you make?"

The retort passed Alice's lips in spite of her. It caused Mrs. Brackett to shoot her a hostile glance, but Norman, who had been making love for over three decades, remembered the scene in the conservatory only as a passing incident, and remembered as little concerning what he had said as about the number of drinks he had taken during the same evening.

"The reports are not all in," he jocosely answered.

"Then you expect a good many victims of your fascinations?"

"Not over a score, and I fear that none of those will be so far affected as to resort to suicide."

"Do you mean all that you say to the ladies?"

"All, and more! By Mars! I live in the light of their smiles—why should I not tell them so?"

The gallant colonel had assumed a striking position and was accompanying his remarks with appropriate gestures, as blissfully unconscious as a child that anything but idle talk was afoot.

But if he, man-like, was stupid, Mrs. Brackett, woman-like, read as she would read a book. She had been scanning Alice's face, and she now sat down heavily, as it were, upon the loquacious Kentuckian.

"You must not suppose they would believe you, sir. Women estimate men for what they are worth, and find them a very cheap article. Now, don't utter any more nonsense, or you will lose our good will. Sit down, and be sensible!"

Her commands would only have produced a more radical outburst, but she made a gesture so imperative, and frowned so heavily upon the clumsy warrior, that even he took the hint.

"A little nonsense, now and then, is relished by the wisest of men," he meekly remarked, as he sat down.

Deeply Alice regretted her blindness then. For ten years sight had been denied her, but she had the instinct of her sex, and was eager to watch and study her companions. Had one of them touched her, she would have shrunk away as from contamination, for she loathed both since what she had heard in the conservatory, but she felt that the family honor was at stake, and, for her father's sake, was eager to uphold it.

Had she not been blind she would have been a powerful factor in the case, for the Brackett iron will was strong within her, but she now felt as she really was—painfully helpless.

At this point there was an interruption. Abram Brackett had finished with English John and courteously seen him to the door, and, having been told that he had a caller, he entered the parlor.

He understood very well why Yoke Norman was there, but his manner was as courteous as ever when he greeted him.

"How're you feeling after the ball, judge?" airily inquired the Kentuckian.

"Very well, thank you."

"After pleasure, business. Eh?"

"That is the usual order."

"Hope you won't be put out to learn that I'm here on business."

"Not in the least," Brackett tranquilly answered.

"We must now whoop her up on election."

"The day is near at hand."

"And we who are to be candidates must fling our flags to the breeze."

"Provided one can be raised."

"Ha! ha!—good joke; very good joke!" asserted Colonel Yoke, rubbing his hands and pretending to be greatly amused. "Well, sir, I hope to raise a breeze."

"That is pleasant, for you."

"Yes."

The Kentuckian leaned forward and confidentially added:

"Judge, I'm going right in on my muscles to be mayor."

"Yes!"

"Yes, sir! And, judge, I want your help!"

The speaker flung himself back in his chair so abruptly as to create a natural fear for the safety of his neck, and eagerly awaited Brackett's reply. He, like the female Cæsar, studied the judge's face in painful suspense, but that firm countenance had never been more steady and unreadable.

"Colonel," was the deliberate reply, "if you want a mainspring put in your watch, would you hire a blacksmith to do it?"

"Would I? Of course not."

"It would be as appropriate as to ask me to pull political wires. I am not a politician."

"But you are a man of influence."

"Limited!"

"Nonsense! There isn't another man now in this city who has the influence you possess. Nicholson wields power, it is true, but if he was not mayor, what would he amount to? You know that by education, experience, business ability and strength of mind you are far his superior."

"Nevertheless, you fear him more than you do me," dryly returned the judge.

"I understand. Yes; I fear him in my race to be mayor. I should fear you far more were you a candidate, for I know your influence. I want that influence thrown for me, Brackett!"

Alice listened in indignation. The Kentuckian's audacity amazed her—how dared he make love to another man's wife, and then seek the aid of the wronged husband? More than once she was on the point of starting up and denouncing the conspirators, but she disliked to be the one to throw the bomb into the household which should hopelessly sunder it. So she trembled with indignation, and shrunk further away from Yoke Norman and Agatha Brackett as from so many loathsome serpents.

"Colonel," the judge gravely replied, "you have had my answer previous to to-day."

"Opinions change."

"Not always."

"I believe Mrs. Brackett has asked this of you, as a personal favor?"

"She has; and has been answered as I answer you. My life has been a busy one, and I have seen the workings of politics in the East and in the West; in large places and in small places. I have known the party-workers, big and little; have seen the way the 'machines' are run; know something about the degree of purity which prevails in such matters; and from my own experience, I am led to affirm that it would be hard to find anything more corrupt than politics. Take the business where you will, it is a dirty pool of mud and water. I want no part of it. I have always refused to enter politics; my intentions have not changed!"

Calmly Brackett looked at his hearers. His voice had not expressed the least trace of emotion, but he had never been more truly the "Iron Judge."

Mrs. Brackett, who knew him so well, felt that their cause was wholly hopeless.

She did not accept defeat philosophically. Her face was pale with anger, and her teeth shone almost carnivorously from between her parted lips. All that was evil within her was aroused, but she imitated her husband in one respect—she curbed her passion, and gave no violent exhibition, but was none the less dangerous.

Colonel Yoke Norman was disheartened, but not wholly discouraged. He had too much at stake to yield tamely.

He rallied his argumentative powers to meet the difficulty and did his best. He was eager; Brackett was icily calm; Mrs. Brackett was sullen; Alice was anxiously listening to hear the result. If her father had yielded, she might then have made known what she had overheard in the conservatory, but he did not yield.

Not once allowing his temper to become ruffled, he refused to argue with Norman, and reiterated his refusal until even the Kentuckian was compelled to believe. It was hard, and the doughty ex-soldier did not take it at all kindly. He said a few vicious things, which were not answered, and then prepared with more haste than ceremony to leave the house.

As he did so, he gave Mrs. Brackett a significant glance and nod. He took pains to do this when the judge would not detect him, and as Alice could use her ears only to weigh the schemers in the balance, the secret signs passed unseen by all except Agatha.

Then Norman left the house. He did not vouchsafe a word of farewell, and good manners were thrown to the winds. The door closed with a bang, and there was something ominous about the sound.

CHAPTER XXXII. THE GLITTERING BAIT.

THE Bracketts were alone. The sound made by the banging of the door had died away, and the silence was oppressive. Only Alice looked relieved—the judge was stern, and Mrs. Brackett's lips were drawn together in that peculiar, rigid line which those of her sex affect when high indignation is marked with ill-tempered silence.

Stiffly she arose and turned toward the door. Then Abram Brackett spoke her name:

"Agatha!"

She turned and looked at him in sullen silence. "I hope you are not too much disappointed," he added.

An expression of withering contempt and sarcasm appeared upon her face.

"My lord and master," she returned in low, measured, but bitter words, "even though it were your august desire to have me decapitated, it would be my duty and desire to comply with your wishes!"

And then she swept from the room like a queen.

Abram Brackett arose, but made no effort to stop her. His face was somber, but there was no evidence that he was in any way weakening. Alice arose. She spoke, and her voice was faint and tremulous.

"Father!"

"Yes, my child?"

"Are we alone?"

"Yes, Alice."

"Do you know what you have done?"

"To what do you refer?"

"You have refused to help Colonel Norman. They will be very angry at you."

"No doubt."

"Watch them well, father; they are not to be trusted. Ambition is a fatal fire, which consumes all that is good in one's nature. Those who scheme to rule the city will not let anything, or any one, stand in their way. Watch them, father! Oh! for my sake, guard your life well. I should die if harm came to you."

Her self-possession had deserted her. She was thoroughly alarmed, and shook pitifully with overpowering emotions. The judge had taken her hand and passed his arm around her waist, and he proceeded to soothe and quiet her. Never before had his physical and mental strength, his strong will and his fatherly affection been more noticeable.

"Be calm, my dear child!" he said, in low, steady, reassuring voice. "There is no ground for fear. Colonel Norman may be angry, but he is powerless. His personal following is insignificant, and I could afford to smile at his irritation did I not consider it beneath my notice. Have no fear, Alice!"

He did not for a moment indicate that he knew of the secret upon which Alice's fears were grounded, but his influence was strong; he quieted the girl with the same power he had exercised in her childhood, and she half forgot her fears.

Somewhat later he escorted her to her room, and then, meeting Marie, made inquiry:

"Where is your mistress?"

"She has gone to ride, sair. Did you veesh to see her?" the French girl inquired.

"There is no haste."

With this reply the judge left Marie. To him the ride taken by his wife seemed to be a very trivial matter. In thus thinking he fell into error—it was important. The lady had gone out with a motive, and it was soon made manifest. She had delicate business on hand, and would under no condition have trusted Marie. She did trust her magnificent creature in buttons, the coachman, and, despite his indiscretion in mentioning the arsenic, she could do so quite safely.

He drove her out on the road where she had once encountered and entertained Garry Kean in her carriage. This time she found a companion, but not one with the ex-actor's sense of honor and justice.

Colonel Yoke Norman was waiting by the way; and at Mrs. Brackett's order, the statue in buttons reined in the horses and gave the Kentuckian a chance to enter. He did so, the journey was resumed, and the schemers looked at each other in momentary silence.

The colonel's face bore a vicious expression, and he was not long without words.

"Well, we are done up brown!" was his inelegant, but forcible comment.

"Yes."

"No hope of Brackett now."

"No."

"He would rather crush than help us."

"I presume so."

"You speak like a mere machine!" Norman irritably exclaimed. "Have you no life left?"

"Colonel, I was tempted not to come here," Mrs. Brackett slowly answered.

"You were?" he cried, with a scowl.

"Yes. Only my promise brought me. Colonel, I am sick at heart! What can I do, what can I amount to, in this world? I am ambitious, and I possess the qualifications necessary for me to make my way. Call me vain if you will, but I have beauty, intelligence and wit—"

"Divine trio!"

Mrs. Brackett shrugged her shoulders. The interruption had broken the thread of her remarks, and her conclusion was made in a different tone:

"And a husband who is a clod! What business has a *judge* to be indifferent to honor and advancement? What business had the man to marry ME, and then decree that we should sink into a life as mild as that of owls?"

"None, by my life! Madam—"

"I am worn out; the man has done his work and I am crushed. Henceforth, farewell all that I hold dear! Farewell ambition, rank, high estate, personal triumphs and all that men and women should strive for! 'Farewell the tranquil mind!—farewell content!—farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars, that make ambition virtue!' Bah! why do I fall into poetry? I can understand just how Othello felt, but why lament like a weak child? The world has seen how grand I can be in victory; it shall see how marble-like I can be in defeat!"

Despite her words the lady was anything but marble-like then. Her eyes were glittering; her fair cheeks had flushed with excitement; her fingers worked nervously over and between each other, and she was more like a caged tigress than the thing of marble her alert fancy had conjured up for the hour.

"Come!" expostulated Norman; "this talk is wrong."

"Why?"

"You, of all persons, should not weaken."

"Disgust, sir, will sap the strongest ambition."

"Nonsense! You must rally—"

"I decline to rally. Do you know that I came near breaking my engagement to meet you here?"

"The Kentuckian's jaw fell."

"You did?"

"Verily, I did."

"Why?"

"Because, having decided to abandon hope, I thought it would be just as well to sink without making a bubble on the surface."

"You shall not sink!" declared the colonel.

"It would be horrible to see a woman like you go down,"—he was thinking of his own schemes, not of her—"and I protest. Come, my dear madam—rally, rally! What! one of your courage be prostrated because a stupid man has tried to set his iron heel upon you? Is that the proper way? Where is your spirit? Look you!—the eagle cannot be netted in a spider's web, or the lion chained with a thread of silk. Where is your courage? Will you, a woman of divine gifts be conquered because a brutal husband says: 'You are physically weak, and I am strong; you are my wife, and must obey me?' Will you crouch under his testy humor, and kiss the hand which would make you a slave?"

The crafty colonel knew just how to arouse her, and he did his work well.

She sat more erect, and hot anger flashed in her great, glittering eyes.

"There is one thing which does not occur to you, colonel," she responded. "I can go ahead, ignore the judge and work for glory, but it will be purchased at great cost. I am proud, and, as much as I despise him, I could not bear to have men and women point to me in the hour of triumph and say: 'She is a woman cast off by her husband!' I could not, would not, endure that!"

Norman leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"Between you and me, they won't have a chance."

"What do you mean?"

"Brackett is going to leave this city."

"I have not heard of it."

"Nor has he; and right at this point comes in a secret. I have it on good authority that the Reds contemplate a riot. They are dissatisfied with Brackett, who, of a truth, has been mighty severe upon them, and they say the judge must leave town or die. Naturally, he will leave. Now, this is no scarecrow, but solid fact; the Reds are going to run Brackett out of town. I have it straight."

He had gained some information on the point, but by no means the whole truth. He believed that the contemplated uprising was to be confined to action against Brackett, and did not suspect that politics had anything to do with it, or that the Reds intended to seize the City Hall, or commit any act of violence beyond the attack upon Brackett.

"The man has brought all this upon himself," the Kentuckian continued. "He has been a harsh, merciless judge, and has met all men, honest or otherwise, with the same cavalier treatment shown us to-day. Now, he is going down like a lump of lead. Are you willing to be involved in his ruin?"

Mrs. Brackett made no reply, so Norman answered for her:

"Heaven forbid! Why should you suffer for that man's folly? Let him go—as he must go, when the Reds rise. You are not an object of their anger. You can remain here, and, freed from your incubus, can reign as queen more brilliantly than ever. A new career would be open to you, and all men would bow to your royal will. Unhampered by antagonistic elements, what could you not do?"

Still the lady was silent, but her face told the story.

Norman had talked cunningly, and had known just how to reach her prejudices. He had done it well, and her towering ambition fell into line with his seductive arguments and pointed out a road which, though darkened by shadows of misdemeanor, if not of crime, led to glittering heights.

But she answered nothing.

Norman's eyes were glittering, and he lowered his voice still more and presented the final argument.

"When Brackett is driven out, he will be a man under a ban—ruined. You do not deserve to fall with him. Let him go, but go alone. You should remain here, where all look up to, admire and love you. If you should desire,"—for one moment the colonel hesitated—"you can get a divorce. You would not lack suitors!"

He had said all that he had to say; he leaned back and awaited her reply.

Mrs. Brackett turned her head aside and gazed at the objects by the way without seeing them. She was confused, angry and uncertain. More than that, she was a pitiable example of misdirected energy. Her ambition was the curse of her life. No one knew better than she that Abram Brackett was a man of rare nobility, and that their present relations were wholly due to her own folly. He had never been cold and reserved to her until her thirst for notoriety ran away with her judgment, and caused her to put slights upon him.

She did not care for all that now. The man had refused to cater to her ambition, and her anger amounted to mad passion and hatred. Yet, she was not all evil. She would not have harmed him, or done what she considered a crime. Her temptation, craftily presented, was one to cast the judge off, apply for a divorce, and rule as an unrivaled, untrammelled queen in the social world of the poor little mining-town.

Such was her temptation, but the pupil sometimes outdoes the master.

While Norman talked glowingly of life at Jack's Delight, she looked past him, as it were. If she was free, why should she be content with the inter-mountain camp? Other places should be open to her—Boise City, Denver, San Francisco—and, with her beauty, intelligence and cunning, she could make her way anywhere.

Slowly she turned again to Norman.

"I will consider your suggestion," she announced, in a low voice.

"You can arrive at but one conclusion."

"I think you are right."

"We are not black slaves—we of this generation."

"One word: Can this matter be arranged so that people will not sneer at me?"

"Most certainly. You have only to remain behind when Brackett is driven out. People will say you are well rid of him."

"I will consider your words, and—it would not surprise me if I accepted!"

She aroused and looked around like one arousing from sleep.

"I have gone as far as I care to," she added; "we will turn back."

"You may drop me here. I have business to transact, and, besides, it would not be well for us to be seen too much together."

Mrs. Brackett did not object, and when the grand creature in buttons had turned the carriage, Norman alighted. The carriage sped along the homeward road, while the colonel looked after it, smiled sarcastically and muttered:

"The bait has caught her; she is on the hook. Oh! woman, I thank Heaven that vanity is the birthright of the sisterhood!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE UPRISING OF THE REDS.

Two days passed. The unnatural calm continued at Jack's Delight, and the court was without business. The last case had been disposed of, and no more were presented. The turbulent, drunken Reds seemed to have become the best of citizens. For a long time they had practically supported the court, but they drank to excess no more; if they quarreled and fought, the fact was not known outside their own ranks; and a newspaper in an adjoining town, which had found Jack's Delight a rich field, was growing tame in consequence of the city's halcyon days.

It was a delusive calm, but if some were deceived, this did not apply to the leaders of the better class.

English John's effort to give Garry Kean all the credit for overhearing the plot in the saloon having been discovered by the latter, he wrote a note to Judge Brackett in which he asserted that he had not been seeking credit on a false basis; that John deserved all the praise in the case as far as the discovery went, but no praise whatever for trying to shift all the glory upon a man who deserved none—namely, himself.

This frank, modest letter was answered by the Iron Judge in person. He called upon Kean, and an amicable interview followed. He gracefully admitted that he had been guided too much by prejudice in his former interviews with the ex-actor, and begged his pardon for whatever injustice had been done.

Garry met this friendly confession frankly, but did not abuse it. Without venturing to be more familiar or sociable, he answered courteously, but maintained the same dignity which had previously marked their conversation.

One step was gained, however: they were on better footing than before.

English John and Garry were not idle during this lull. They knew that the Reds were at work, and they set out to watch them. They had the best of luck. The Reds' old confidence in John's harmlessness did not waver, and as he lived in their very midst, he was able to see and hear a good deal that was of interest. Garry visited him only at night, and the schemers did not suspect how much danger lurked in the little hut above which fluttered the Stars and Stripes.

On the third day the first real note of warning reached Abram Brackett. It was in a note which Job brought him, and which that person said was given him by Garry Kean, and the judge easily recognized the ex-actor's bold, legible writing in the few lines which followed:

"The blow will fall to-night. They have perfected their plans, and will strike shortly after twelve o'clock. Their force will be divided, and directed as follows: A small detachment will attack your house. The building—if they have their way—will be burned to the ground. We do not learn that any harm will be offered Mrs. or Miss Brackett, but it is their avowed purpose to violently expel you from the town. The enmity of Nathan Bradley is solely responsible for this. Tar and feathers are mentioned, but it is only reasonable to suspect that there is something back of this, and, once in their hands, your life may be in danger."

"The second and larger force will attack the City Hall. As before indicated, they intend to seize the rifles kept there, and then, in case the 'Blacks' resist, use the building for a fort. Later indications emphasize the fact that they are terribly in earnest, and that this city will be fortunate to escape a reign of terror and of blood. We might use many words to impress the solemnity of the times upon your mind, but we believe that you fully realize how critical the case is."

Brackett read with his usual calmness, and then went to see Sheriff White. This he did in a way not calculated to arouse suspicion, but they had a long conference.

The day passed; night fell.

For several hours all was quiet. The Reds, by Nathan Bradley's orders, passed the evening as usual, and there was no suspicious sign until after midnight. Then, when the honest folks were supposed to be asleep, the rioters gathered quietly.

Bradley assigned every man to a designated place. A few were scattered to points where no fighting was to be expected, but active service was marked out for the majority. Of these, twenty men, under Thad Johnson, were to go to Brackett's house, burn that building, and visit the anger of the rioters upon the master thereof.

The remainder were to go with Bradley to seize and, afterward, defend the City Hall.

Johnson marched his force silently along until a position near the doomed house was gained. Then he drew out a watch, with which he had been provided, and awaited the exact time set by his superior. The big ruffian was exulting already in the expected triumph, and a more merciless leader could not have been found.

He finally closed the watch with a sharp click.

"Time's up!" he announced.

His followers were glad of it, and they said as much. Thad led them to the house, which they proceeded to surround, skulking close to the sides where the shadows would conceal them. Johnson walked to the door and knocked.

He had expected considerable delay, but there was next to none. An upper window was raised and a head was thrust out.

"Who's there?" inquired a voice, very distinctly.

"Me," Thad answered. "I've come from the mayor, with a message for the judge, and I want ter see him right away."

"You will have to go to the City Hall," announced the same voice, even more clearly than before.

"Hey?" cried Johnson.

"Judge Brackett and all his family are at the City Hall, where he has an engagement with Nate Bradley's Reds. We, however, are here as his representatives, and we are prepared to receive all comers. We shall not open the door, however, so your heels need not skulk by the house. Thad Johnson, you have a big contract if you think to do damage here! We are on to your game, and will shoot the first man who tries to enter here!"

The man at the window had spoken, and his words had been to the point. Thad stood in dumfounded silence, staring upward blankly. No one could fail to understand what had been said, but his head was thick, and he could hardly realize what his judgment told him.

The elaborate scheme of the Reds had miscarried? Impossible! He must have heard wrong. He was the victim of a hallucination—of a joke—but that the plot was public property—that was out of the question.

He lifted his voice weakly.

"Say, up there?"

"What is it?"

"What did you say?"

A mocking laugh followed.

"There are none so deaf as those who will not hear. You caught on all right, bully Johnson, but—"

A rifle-shot sounded on the air, coming from the direction of the City Hall.

"Let that answer you!" added the voice. "The battle has begun, and there will be a thinning out of Reds, unless you and your fellow cut-throats go home!"

Just then half a dozen shots sounded in succession, almost like an irregular volley.

"Be warned in time!" shouted the man at the window. "All your plots have fallen through; you will neither surprise nor defeat us. Go away! I warn you that a force of well-armed men are in this house, to guard it to the death. Brackett and all his folks are at the City Hall. If any man raises his hand here, in hostility, he will be shot on the spot!"

As though to confirm this statement, several more shots sounded from the City Hall, and Thad Johnson felt his villainous heart sink and lie within him like lead. He had come to surprise and maltreat a defenseless family, not to fight a force of armed men at a disadvantage.

"Now, be off with you!" ordered the man above. "We will not have any one skulking here. Clear out, or we shall use you for targets!"

That troublesome heart of the bully quivered and jumped.

"Boys, I reckon we'd better go back for orders!" he observed, hurriedly.

They went, and there was no immediate attack upon the Brackett house.

This could not be said regarding the City Hall. Bradley had led the force against that building, in person, and had expected an easy triumph, but he was woefully disappointed. He found it garrisoned, and, as soon as concealment became out of the question, it was lighted, and he realized the magnitude of the work ahead of him. An effort was made to beat down the main door, but they were first allowed to see that it was too firmly barricaded to be carried by any ordinary pressure, and then a shot fired in the air caused them to scatter.

They were not conquered, and their temporary retreat was caused by surprise rather than actual fear. They drew off to a safe distance, fired a few vain shots, and then called for consultation.

Within, the City Hall resembled a fort in earnest. The weak points had been made as strong as possible; windows had been well secured and boarded, and as the coveted rifles were in the hands of the defenders, they were in a cheerful mood. This could not be said of all the occupants of the building. Women and children had been hastily called from their homes to the "fort," and, naturally, most of them were in a panic. They were huddled together in some parts of the big edifice and scattered in others, so that the scene was not unlike the days when the forest pioneers took to their block-houses to resist the Indians.

Mrs. Brackett was there, but she gave little heed to the other women. She was not frightened, but she was angry and disappointed. She watched her chance, and, when she thought herself unobserved, spoke to Colonel Yoke Norman:

"What will be the end of this?" she asked, in a hard voice, and the Kentuckian laconically replied:

"Fighting!"

"It does not look now as though Abram Brackett would be driven out of Jack's Delight."

"To tell the truth, the Old Nick seems to be on the judge's side," was the melancholy confession.

"He is crafty as Mephistopheles."

"Just about."

"He has known of their plots all the time."

"I am obliged to believe you," the colonel growled, surlily.

"What will be the result? Why, Brackett will be a greater hero than ever, and ride on the top wave of popularity."

"Not by a durned sight!" declared Norman, viciously.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FOES WITHOUT AND FOES WITHIN.

THE Kentuckian had been standing with his hands in his pockets, sulky as a schoolboy, but he now aroused suddenly and cast a sharp glance around. Believing that they were not watched, he eagerly added:

"Look you—do you know my position here?"

"No," Mrs. Brackett answered.

The colonel's red face deepened in color until it was almost purple.

"I am a nonentity," he hissed. "From the very start I have been ignored and 'set down' on! My advice is not asked, and when I have tried to give it, I have been snubbed. From one of the leading men of the city I have sunk to one of the lowest. I am a nobody!"

The angry gleam in his eyes was reflected in Mrs. Brackett's.

"Who has done this?" she asked.

"Elijah Nicholson, Sheriff White, and—our precious Abram Brackett!"

"The wretches!" muttered Mrs. Brackett.

"I am thrown overboard, but they will find that they have made a bad enemy. I will be avenged!"

"Right, colonel; right!"

"Will you aid me?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes."

"Then, by heaven! we will make them the sickest lot of folks on earth. If your wit and mine can't bring about their ruin, what can?"

"What do you propose?"

Again the Kentuckian looked carefully around before he answered.

"We will betray them to the Reds!" he whispered, sibilantly.

"Can it be done?" she asked, feverishly.

"Why not?"

"I do not see the ways and means."

"All are now on the alert, and a move at this time would be disastrous in the extreme, but when these buzzing bees have wearied themselves out, there will be some chance. I do not yet see my way clear, but I can communicate with the besiegers by writing a note and flinging it out. Then, later, the chance may be offered for me to unfasten a door and let them in."

"And what then?"

"We shall deserve something at their hands."

"There will be fighting?"

"Of course."

"And bloodshed—"

"Let us not speak of that!"

"There are women and children here."

"I will stand between them and harm."

He was waiting for her answer, but she hesitated. She knew what the Reds were, and though she tried to shut her eyes to their character, the danger of a massacre was too likely to be overlooked. She was smarting under a sense of injustice—so she considered it—and her vindictiveness urged her on, but she hesitated. If she had any share in acts which should bring about a tragic triumph of the roughs, she could not but feel herself a murderess from that hour.

"We have gone too far to turn back," added Norman, persuasively.

"You are right."

"I fear you can never return to Brackett's house."

She started as though stung by a serpent.

"I have no desire to!" she answered, bitterly.

"The man has doomed me to every possible indignity; I want no more of him or his house. Treat with the Reds as you will; you may consider me your ally!"

So saying, she turned and walked quickly away. Some reply the Kentuckian made, but she did not hear or heed it. She was in a most unenviable mood. Evil and good were fighting within her for supremacy, and once more the former had triumphed. Colonel Yoke Norman exulted in this fact, but he might have curbed his feelings. If he had but known it, Mrs. Brackett loathed him. She had never liked the man, but had clung to him as one who could lift her to power. He had led her by a tortuous road, however, and he had become repulsive in the extreme.

Her dream of power was fast fading away, and had it not been for what she thought to be indignities put upon her, she would have thrown him over at once and forever. But she was eager to be revenged upon the judge, and that kept her up, and stirred her evil passions afresh.

The scene around her was staggering, however. She saw loving wives, and mothers, and sisters, each anxious for her dear ones. These they had, but what had the female Caesar? No one came to her to give or seek comfort. She was like one alone in the world. The ties of family life had been torn asunder by her own hand, and in their place she had only the delusive, vain, hollow hope of notoriety which danced before her eyes like an *ignis fatuus*.

Her heart was heaving within her, and when she saw men in fine clothes, and men in rough clothes, talking consolingly to their wives, she felt that the cup of her bitterness was full.

She looked for Abram Brackett. He was standing some distance away. He had been superintending some work, but it was done, and he was at leisure. He had fallen into thought, and his strong, impressive face was stern and grave. It was a noble face, however, and his wife silently admitted that its equal could not be found in the town.

Further away, Alice was in conversation with a man who was a stranger to Mrs. Brackett—a tall, white-bearded, dignified old gentleman who wore gold-bowed spectacles, and whose garb and general appearance stamped him as a man not long from the East.

Agatha apathetically wondered who he was, and then turned away. The sight was not one to interest her a great while in her present mood.

At this point there was a loud call from outside the building. This surprised no one. The silence of the Reds had plainly had a meaning, and it was not hard to understand. They had been surprised to find their plots so well met, and had retired for consultation. Some plan had been formed, and all were anxious to know what it was.

Sheriff White answered the summons.

"I want to have a talk," announced Nathan Bradley's well-known voice.

"Talk away!" White promptly replied.

"I want to say for the men that follow me, that we are very sorry for any hard feelings that may exist."

"We can easily believe you!" the sheriff returned, sarcastically.

"You don't understand the object of our uprising."

"Perhaps you will enlighten me."

"We do not make war upon the city, but upon Judge Abram Brackett!"

"How is that?"

"We claim that the man is a cruel judge, and a false, perjured tyrant. Law has been thrown to the winds when he sat upon the bench. He is an aristocrat; he hates the poor and unfortunate; and he has twisted the law in every way to ruin and persecute prisoners who were of humble rank in life!"

White smiled in amusement. Everybody in the city knew that Brackett despised, not the poor and their poverty, but the shams and empty show of aristocratic life. To a rich man the judge would render courtesy, if the man deserved it, but he was never so frank and friendly as when with some humble, honest man like English John—and his friendship was sincere.

"Go on!" White directed.

"We, the people," pursued Bradley, now demanded that the aforesaid Abram Brackett be expelled from this town. We have thrown off the chains which have kept us slaves to that merciless tyrant, and we speak for the city. Brackett must go! We are law-abiding men, but we know our rights and will have them. We demand that Brackett be delivered to us, that we may escort him out of town, and warn him never to return. If this is done, we will then return peacefully to our homes."

"And what if we refuse?"

"In that case we shall attack the City Hall, and take Brackett with rifle, revolver and knife, by force!"

Mayor Nicholson sprang to White's side.

"You have said enough, Nathan Bradley!" he shouted, "and the sooner you go back to your fellow-rioters, the better. You will not get Judge Brackett, and that settles it! Do you think us fools? Do you think your clumsy excuse will be believed by us? You are an idiot if you do! We know your plot, and what you aim at. You hate Brackett and would like him in your power, but if you had him, it would not cause you to deviate from your pre-arranged plans. Go back to your ruffians and do your worst! Go back, or I shall order my men to fire upon you!"

There was no mistaking this decisive announcement.

"You will be sorry for this!" cried the 'Red' leader.

"You will be sorry, unless you get away!"

"I'll go, but you'll hear from me again!"

With these words Bradley beat a retreat, but it was not one of dignity. He knew what he deserved, and had a lively fear that he might be fired upon as he went, and he moved his feet like one whose time was limited.

"Stand by to repel an attack!" added the mayor, as he turned to his men.

Miss Electa Parsons, who was standing near, lifted up her hands and eyes, and assumed an expression which, she hoped, was one befitting a modern heroine.

"It's a-comin'!" she declared, tragically.

"The evil-doers are up an' at it, an' the good an' virtuous are faint an' pantin' in their fortresses an' castles. You hear the tocsin sound, feller-women, but I trust it don't stir your nerves ter onseemly cravenness. Let us show the world that the Joan Dorseys, the Charlotte Corduroys an' the Hannah Dust-pans ain't all dead yet. Oh-h-h! Great land o' love!"

A rifle had been discharged outside, and honest Electa, showered with small pieces of glass that were hurled from a broken window by the flying bullet, for the time forgot the immortal Jeanne d'Arc, Charlotte Corday and Hannah Dustin, after whom she aspired to pattern, and gave a true feminine screech.

In a moment, however, she was calm again, and her warrior eye was turned upward.

"They should be took up an' fined fur breakin' that winder!" she severely added.

Electa and her peculiarities were well known, and her artful way of explaining her emotion, and turning attention from it, put the men in good humor and made them more fitted for what came next.

And what came next was—the Reds!

They had been all prepared for work, so when Bradley returned, he had only to pass the word along the line. Then they came sweeping toward the besieged building, firing and yelling, and resembling tigers thirsty for slaughter.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN UNEXPECTED BLOW.

THE defenders were not at loss to know how they ought to receive the enemy. They had not lived neighbors to them at Jack's Delight so long without coming to understand their natures perfectly, and when they rose as rioters, and menaced human life, they simply put themselves on the level of beasts of prey, and were to be dealt with accordingly.

Several shots, as before stated, were fired by the roughs as they made their charge, but their principal object was to beat down the doors and secure entrance.

On they came in a body, whooping and yelling like the maddened demons they were.

Mayor Nicholson shouted a warning, but it was to be doubted if any one heard it outside; it was not heeded.

It would not do to hesitate any longer; the big doors were well barricaded, but the impetus of so many men was not to be disregarded or defied.

One shot was fired in the air was a warning, but, as had been expected, it was without effect. Then the word was given for sterner work, and a volley was fired directly into the rushing mass. What followed was—confusion. The shouts of men mingled with the roar of fire-arms, both parties using their weapons freely; and the whole building shook with the force of the assault upon the doors.

But the doors stood firm. It could not well be otherwise, for, back of them, was a pile of logs which could not be moved. Weak points the "fort" had, but the big double door did not furnish one of them.

Unconscious of the stout barricade, the Reds hurled themselves against the obstruction time and again, but only to get bruised shins and joints. A perception of the truth finally dawned upon them, and, unable to stand the galling fire, some of their number broke and run. That was enough; like sheep following a leader, the others bounded away at full speed.

The first triumph was in favor of the besieged, and the cheer which ascended made the building shake again. None of their party had been injured, and the effect of the struggle was excellent; it strengthened the courage of the weak-hearted.

How the Reds felt the men of the garrison did not know. Some of them were past the emotions of life, and others had probably carried away painful wounds.

Garry Kean had been active during the fight, but when it was over, he, without waiting for the excitement to abate, approached the old gentleman in gold-bowed spectacles, of whom mention has before been made.

"Well, sir," the ex-actor said, eagerly, "what is your verdict?"

"I have conversed with Miss Brackett," the gentleman replied, "and find her an intelligent and very estimable young lady. That does not answer your question, but I thought it might interest you."

"Indeed, it does, sir."

"As to her unfortunate affliction, while I talked I looked carefully and critically at her eyes. If she had not already been taken to eminent surgeons, as you say she has, by Judge Brackett, I should hazard the opinion that her sight could be restored."

"Bear in mind that they had not your skill."

The old gentleman shook his head gravely.

"Brackett has not allowed all these years to pass without having consulted some practitioner renowned in the treatment of the eyes."

"But they are not *you*!"

"Do not confide too much in my skill; I am only human. Still, I tell you fairly that I think she can be helped."

"Would it not be well to see the judge now?"

"No. Let matters rest for the present. Brackett has enough upon his mind, and I am by no means sure that I am wholly calm. Suppose he should call upon me at once to do the work? My hands might not be steady enough for such delicate labor."

"Truly—I realize that. When you work, all must be favorable. Long as your brilliant and noble career has been, you never before had a case so important as this!"

Garry Kean's voice trembled, and the old gentleman laid one hand sympathetically on his arm.

"I understand, my boy; I understand. Be of good cheer, for a just and gracious Providence rules, and I believe that, with its aid, I can restore Alice Brackett's sight. Now, let us talk no more, or attention may be drawn to me. I want to observe all these parties in whom we have interest, and form an estimate of each."

"You cannot but have estimated Alice already."

"I have estimated her, and I fully agree with all you have said. She is an amiable, intelligent, noble girl."

Kean wrung the old gentleman's hand, and then turned and walked quickly away, not daring to trust himself to make a reply.

In the meanwhile, an adverse element was at work within the building which no one suspected.

Elmer Nicholson carried a vindictive heart to the refuge, and nearly every one came under the ban of his displeasure. Since he was last prominently before the reader, he had made a desperate effort to get on good terms at Brackett's. He had managed to see Alice and declare his alleged affection for her. Being refused, he sought the judge, and requested him to compel his daughter "to listen to reason"—and to the speaker's suit. Brackett had politely declined to interfere, whereupon he became boisterous

and abusive, and the judge had left the room and refused all further conversation with him.

The young man's next step was to seek his own father, the mayor, and ask his aid to "compel" Alice to accept him as a suitor. Again he was refused.

No one knew better than Elijah Nicholson how unworthy Elmer was. He had an elder son who was at a celebrated college in the East, but had no intention of sending Elmer there. The elder son was strong, honest and intelligent; Elmer was just the reverse. For years the old gentleman had tried to make something of him, but he had failed signally, and never expected better things.

He declined to assist in compelling Alice to marry the youth, and then Elmer's cup of bitterness and revenge was full. Hence, he came into the fortress with his worst passions aroused, and from the first he began to plan mischief. He had not given Alice up, by any means—he determined to cast off all restraint and win her in spite of all opposition.

The means of accomplishing his object were not, unfortunately, lacking.

Among those who were among the building's trusted defenders were two whom he knew he could rely upon. They were rough men, but generally considered honest. Elmer knew they were not. Before then he had secured their services by the payment of money, and he knew that money, too, would lead them to do anything.

His present ambition was to get Alice out of the City Hall, away from her friends—away from the Reds—and away from every one but himself. He had a vague picture in mind in which he saw himself with the captive girl mounted on a big black horse, speeding into the trackless wilderness like a knight of old, or some other romantic—and knavish—person. Where they would go he did not know, but he pulled his dim little mustache fiercely, and mentally assured himself that the West was wide and wild, and that, once clear of the town, he could defy pursuit.

Unfortunately, the plans of a fool are at times capable of being carried out.

Elmer did not see how his were to be made feasible until chance favored him. The peculiar situation of the conservatory annex made it nearly secure from assault, and no force was placed there. A trusty man stood by the door, and that was all. This place, it had been decided, was to be the sleeping quarters of the women.

Young Nicholson's plot took shape when he saw Alice and Electa retire to the conservatory in advance of all others. Then what had before seemed visionary became possible, and he flew to his allies to put them to work.

Shortly after, the man who had stood guard at the door appeared in the main room and approached Mayor Nicholson.

"Wal, sir, what is it?" he asked.

"What is *what*?" Nicholson returned.

"What d'ye want o' me?"

"I? Nothing."

"Didn't you send for me?"

"Certainly not!"

"Your boy said ye did. He said I was ter report ter you right away, an'—"

"Didn't you have charge of the north door?"

"Yes."

"Who is there now?"

"Elmer. He said them was your orders—"

The sentence was not finished. An anxious expression had appeared on the mayor's face, and he hastened toward the conservatory. He was followed by Judge Brackett, Garry Kean and English John, and the troubled look was reflected in their own expressions. Alice had lately gone to the conservatory, and Elmer Nicholson was not the proper man to stand guard at a door which interposed between the girl and danger.

They reached the annex, and the first view caused them to stand dumb with dismay. Elmer was not visible, but the door was wide open! Only one thing had prevented the entrance of the Reds, and that was the fact that they, like the defenders, did not consider the point one favorable to violent entrance, and had not had any one there to discover how easily it could be carried just then.

Mayor Nicholson's face grew white.

"Just Heaven! there is treachery here!" he gasped.

Brackett looked anxiously around.

"Where is Alice?" he cried, in a husky voice.

"Powers of mercy! what has that mad boy done?" demanded Nicholson, in whose mind was a realization of the terrible truth.

Brackett had turned to search the place, but Garry Kean's eyes were more useful, and he discovered an irregular piece of paper tied to the handle of the door. He tore it away and, seeing a few written lines, hastily read as follows:

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

"I have struck out in life for myself. If any one wants to see me or Alice Brackett, we may be looked for among the wild fastnesses and untrodden areas of the mountains. ELMER NICHOLSON."

Garry had read aloud, and the mayor's voice took up the thread of remarks where Elmer had had left it.

"Gone!" he uttered, hoarsely; "gone out where every foot of the way is roamed by the lawless Reds! For the boy I care nothing, but, oh! Brackett, what of your daughter?"

The Iron Judge drew a revolver, and, while his face and voice had a stony calmness, replied:

"She shall be saved, or revenged!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A QUICKENED CONSCIENCE.

GARRY KEAN was almost stunned by the news! It was bad enough that Alice should be the captive of young Nicholson, as she certainly must have been to go with him, but when it came to going out among the Reds—then it was something alarming in the extreme. Enough honest men had been left outside to protect the village from any attempt to burn it, if such a notion entered the minds of the Reds, but it could not be expected that they would be at hand to defend Alice.

English John was the coolest man in the group. He, alone, recognized the fact that the note might be mere bravado, though he did not believe that it was, and he suggested that thorough search be made for the girl.

This was done, but it only established the fact that she and Electa were missing.

"What is to be done?" the mayor asked, blankly.

"I am going at once to rescue my daughter!" Brackett replied, with icy calmness.

"Count me in!" exclaimed the miner.

"And me," the ex-actor added.

"Can you spare them, Nicholson?"

"Yes; and as many more men as you desire."

"I want no more. A small force of good men is better than a large one of indifferent workers. Are you ready to go?"

He turned to Garry and English John as he spoke, and both answered in the affirmative promptly. No more time was lost; they went at once. Nicholson wrung Brackett's hand, but he spoke not a word. His heart was too full for utterance. He had learned before that night that his son was a worthless wretch, but had not thought him so bad as he had been proven. It was less this, however, than pity for the judge and his blind daughter that moved the mayor.

The door closed after them, but Nicholson did not move until he heard the rustle of garments. Then he turned and saw Mrs. Brackett. Her face bore an expression of startled surprise.

"Where has my husband gone?" she asked, quickly.

"He has gone—a—he has gone out!" stammered the mayor.

"Why?"

"Oh! it is only for a moment."

"But why has he gone!—where has he gone?"

Nicholson had thought best to keep the knowledge of Brackett's danger from his wife, but the impossibility of accounting for the absence of both the judge and Alice in any ordinary way seemed to be so out of the question that he changed his mind and told the whole story in a few broken words.

Mrs. Brackett's eyes dilated.

"Will it not be dangerous?" she asked.

"Heaven help them all! nothing could be more dangerous! They are liable to fall into the hands of the Reds at any moment. Think of that blind girl in such a situation! Think of Abram Brackett, whom they, without cause, hate so bitterly! I am afraid he has gone to sure death, but that could not daunt him. He is full of heroism, and his love for Alice passes all other affection which I ever knew. The heroes of old are as nothing compared to your husband!"

The speaker was too wretched, too much moved to weigh his words, and he made them stronger than he would have done had not his own heart been wrung with sorrow. Every word went home, and Mrs. Brackett turned quickly away.

At that moment there was a fresh, heavy discharge of firearms in the old quarter, and Nicholson became the warrior again. He hurried away to lead his forces in repelling the attack. It was the fiercest of the night, and for awhile Bedlam seemed to be let loose. Mingled with the sound of firing, were the yells of the Reds, which were positively blood-curdling, while a shower of bullets was rained on the building. Window after window was struck; glass flew in all directions; bullets were imbedded in the walls, or rolled, after failing to effect lodgment, upon the floor.

In this thrilling crisis, the courage of many of the non-combatants gave way. Women and children shrieked, or fell upon their knees in prayer, and a vivid idea was given of what the besiegers were like.

Mrs. Brackett stood at one side, watching the other inmates of the room. She was like a marble woman, and her face was almost colorless, but her mind was busy.

She thought of helpless Alice; of Abram Brackett risking his life for her among men who had sworn to kill him; of the coldness which had sprung up between them in consequence of her own acts. She realized at last what the Reds were—the men she would have aided; to

whom she had promised to betray the men, women and children of the city—and she saw Colonel Yoke Norman standing by, idle, while his neighbors were fighting, a supercilious smile on his liquor-marked face; and then a feeling, new and strange, came over her.

"Just Heaven!" she whispered, "what manner of a woman am I? Am I the enemy of all who are good and true? Am I the ally of Yoke Norman and those howling, would-be murderers? Oh, Heaven! look down in mercy upon me, for I am afraid of myself!"

She shivered, and, indeed, was cold, but it was not the result of the atmosphere; it was due to more potent circumstances. She moved to one side and sat down. Her face was toward the frightened non-combatants, but she scarcely gave them a thought. She saw them and their manifest terror but vaguely; heard but apathetically the sounds of shot and shout.

Her mind had gone back over a period of years.

She remembered how Abram Brackett had wooed her with grave respect and tenderness; how attentive he had been to her and her slightest wishes; how friendly Alice, then a child, had been; how the demon of her ambition had come between them, producing, first of all, dissatisfaction, and, anon, coldness and alienation.

All this, she knew, was her own fault, and she realized at last that she had flung away the diamond for a string of glass—the substance for the shadow—happiness for ambition.

She had wished, but a little while before, that she was rid of the Iron Judge. Now the mere knowledge that he was in peril made her faint and sick at heart.

"May Heaven protect him!" she murmured.

Presently she caught sight of Colonel Yoke Norman, still idle, still sneering, and, while the flush of indignation arose to her face, she hastily approached him.

"Why are you not aiding in the defense?" she demanded, in a hard voice.

The Kentuckian shrugged his shoulders.

"Since we hope to see the Reds triumph, you and I have no call to fight at them," he answered, carelessly.

"Do you see these women and children?"

"Yes."

"What will be their fate if Bradley's men triumph?"

"The aristocrats will probably suffer."

"All are likely to share alike, and they will be as safe as though with tigers—no safer. Colonel Norman, if you are a man, take your place with the other defenders!"

Her imperious tone caused his eyes to open widely.

"Eh?" he muttered.

"I spoke plainly."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this: I repudiate my bargain with you. I have been blind, and worse than that; I have been criminally wicked. Thank Heaven! my eyes are opened at last, and I cast off the chains which have bound me to evil. I decline to consider political glory further; I decline to aid your own ambition; I decline to be the ally of the Reds, and shall watch well to see that you do not betray this party to them. Colonel Norman, a new life begins for me with this hour, and if you are a man, you will take place by the side of your old friends and fight with them. I have no more to say!"

She turned and swept away from the dumfounded colonel, who stared after her in blank amazement and consternation.

He saw her go a few paces aimlessly, and then pause and fix her gaze on a scene a few steps away. A man had been wounded, and those who were trying to care for his wound were showing unusual awkwardness. Mrs. Brackett swept to the place; she gave her aid; her fingers moved deftly, and while his blood discolored her hands and dress, she worked with skill and diligence.

Colonel Yoke Norman gave his mustache a spiteful jerk.

"The jig is up! When proud and lofty Mrs. Brackett descends to such labor, the millennium is come, and there is no room on the express train for me. I'll jump off!"

When Brackett, Kean and English John left the City Hall they found no one to interrupt or molest them. The Reds were in consultation near that part of the building which they considered the weakest, and with an open way, the rescuers were soon clear of the place.

Deeply moved as the Iron Judge was, he retained his usual clearness of perception, and he halted before many rods were left behind them.

"I am going at once to my house," he announced. "It matters but little whether the rioters succeed in burning it, and I shall withdraw my men and scatter them in all directions, to search for and intercept the missing persons. This, however, will cause some delay, and I want a watch established on both the east and west roads as soon as possible. Will you two men undertake this work, one going to each point, and remain there until you have further directions?"

There could be but one reply to this request,

and both Garry and John promptly answered in the affirmative.

The separation was made at once, and each man went his way.

The ex-actor's course was toward the west, and he regarded it as the one the least likely to produce discoveries. This, however, did not prevent him from being alert and watchful.

The whole village was quiet except at the City Hall. Somewhere about the place were stationed the men whose duty it was to foil any effort to burn the dwellings, but they were not to be seen. If there were Reds elsewhere than at the City Hall, they, too, were invisible.

Garry hastened along the deserted streets, and found no one to oppose his progress.

At last he approached Pfaff's saloon, and there for the first time he discovered a light. More than that, voices sounded inside, and as such a step did not seem likely to delay him for more than a moment, he determined to see who was there. It could not be that Pfaff was getting his usual trade when war was the order of the night around him.

This was rendered all the more advisable because the voices were pitched in anger.

Kean pushed the door partly open. A light was burning at the further end of the saloon, and it revealed three persons, one of whom was the corpulent proprietor.

The other two—Garry started and looked in amazement.

Confronting Pfaff like David before Goliath, there stood Elmer Nicholson, and, reclining on a couch, and with her face buried in her hands, a female form was close at hand.

Alice! There could be no one like her. Concealed as her face was, it was surely the judge's daughter. By mere chance, Garry Kean had gone in precisely the right direction, and captor and captive were discovered.

Pfaff was talking excitedly and angrily, yet showing in every way a fear of Elmer born of the latter's position as the mayor's son.

"I don't t'ink dis vas all right!" he declared.

"Der young lady is meeserable, and I t'ink dere is sometings wrong. I vant you to go right away!"

"Don't you fash yourself, old man!" Nicholson retorted. "I don't move at any man's bidding; I'll go when I get ready, and not before."

"You will bring trouble on this saloon, and kill my trade so dead as a stone."

"I don't care a rap for that."

"My advice is dot you send der young lady away. She haf not swooned for not'tings."

"Rest easy; my men have gone for horses, and when they come again, I'll take her away."

The words were barely out of Elmer's mouth when a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a powerful effort forced him down upon one knee. Writhing in vain in that painful grasp, he looked up and saw the stern face and flashing eyes of the ex-actor. The latter had worked quickly and silently, and the surprise was complete.

"Scoundrel and woman-stealer!" Garry Kean sternly uttered, "you shall return yonder girl to her home! I ask not to do it, but that shall be your punishment. You shall take her back, and then others can deal with you as they see fit. In my opinion, there is no other reward so fit for you as to be scourged in the public streets, with the lash well laid on!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE GATHERING OF THE FRAGMENTS.

As the Man with Backbone spoke he caught a brand out of the blazing fire and swung it around his head to increase the light in the saloon.

"Holt on!" cried Pfaff, in terror. "Don't scatter dot fire around here, or you will be-low us all oop. See dot powder!"

He pointed to a small keg in front of Garry, and one glance was enough to show that it was half full of the article he had named. The Reds had ordered powder and stored it in the saloon, and when they had that night secured what they wanted for immediate use, the keg was left as it had last been used, and Pfaff had too much fear of it to move it back.

All this appeared to be a simple affair, but it was destined to be anything else before the sequel came.

Pfaff fled back to avoid the possible explosion, and some sparks were flying from the torch, but a greater danger was at hand. While Elmer still crouched under Garry's painful hold, there was a sudden sound of heavy steps and voices near the door, and into the saloon came a dozen men with Thad Johnson at their head.

"Pfaff!" cried the bully, "we're as dry as Sarah Desert. Set out the liquids!"

He stopped short and stared in dumfounded surprise.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated, "here's a go! Hyar's Garry Kean, kid Nicholson an'—whoop! hyar's Brackett's gal! Tarnal snakes! but ain't we in luck? I dunno how they got hyar, but they're our game, anyhow!"

It was a sight calculated to alarm the bravest man, but the ex-actor remained firm. He was only one against a dozen, each of whom was better armed than himself. In a fight he

would have no chance against them, but his manner was calm and dauntless.

Thad Johnson suddenly leaped into the air and came down heavily on his thick boots.

"Whoop!" he yelled. "D'ye know I'm goin' ter chaw ye all up, pooty play-actor? Wahl! I'll have yer hide ter make a saddle out on, by Cain! Critter, I'm comin'!"

The ruffian was well filled with whisky, which was partially responsible for his extravagant speech, but, whatever he might say, he was in an ugly mood and bent on venting his hatred upon the Man with Backbone.

He took one step forward, but Kean's voice rung out clearly and commandingly:

"Stop!"

Thad obeyed mechanically.

"I warn you not to molest me," added the speaker. "The force of numbers is on your side, but I can annihilate you all if I see fit. If you advance, or draw a weapon, it will be sure death to you!"

"Hal! hal! the little rooster crows wal. How'll ye do it? What are *your* weapons?"

The blazing torch described a circle before the bully's eyes.

"Here is my weapon!" Garry Kean retorted. "Keep back, or I will throw this torch into the keg of powder!"

Johnson fell back a step, and then laughed mockingly.

"Come, now, that's good!" he replied, but his manner was uncertain. "Don't ye know, you fool, that ef you do that you'll suffer as much as us? Thar is powder enough thar ter splinter this buildin', an' blow you into nothin'."

"I am well aware of that, but I had rather die that way than by your hands."

"But the gal—"

"She is unconscious, but I speak for her. Rather than have her fall into your hands, death by annihilation would be a blessing. I mean business, Thad Johnson! Keep back, or you and your followers shall die!"

"He means it, Thad!" declared one of the Reds. "Don't you go up—I don't want no part of a blow-up."

"Nor I," added a second man; who thereupon beat a retreat from the saloon.

Johnson looked ugly, disappointed and uncertain, but his face suddenly brightened.

"By Judas! we ain't done up yet!" he exclaimed. "Ef Kean wants an explosion, he shall hev one. Boys we'll go outside an' set the place on fire. It shall be blowed up, but we won't be hyar ter sail up with it. Get out, my bully boys, an' we'll set the fire at once!"

The Reds made a rush for the door, yelling as they went, and Elmer Nicholson broke into piteous lamentations.

"Oh! oh! we shall die, and I ain't fit. Kean, tell them I am not your ally. I don't deserve—"

Garry gave him a push which sent him sprawling upon the floor, and then sprang forward and lifted the insensible girl from the couch.

"We go to life or death!" he uttered. "I will fight my way through or fall in the attempt!"

Well aware that his only hope lay in prompt action, he ran toward the rear door, the girl's weight not being a very severe test of his good muscles. When he reached the outer air no one was to be seen, and he continued his flight without delay. But he was not able to get clear so easily.

There was a shout in the rear, and, turning, he saw Thad Johnson running forward with his ruffians at his back.

Garry set his teeth tightly. It looked as though he must meet the men in unequal fight, and though he carried two revolvers, there could be but one result of the encounter. It was a bitter knowledge, and he instinctively pressed the form of the blind girl closer in his arms. It would be a consolation, if he must die, to know that it was for her, but what would become of her when he had been conquered?

In looking back at his enemies he had thought less of where he was going, and suddenly, he found himself among other men. Then—it was the rarest music he had ever heard—the voice of English John sounded close at hand.

"Run behind the hut, lad! Thar's fightin' on foot hyar, an' the leetle gal mustn't git hit!"

Garry gave one sweeping glance and saw John, Judge Brackett and other men, and then he obeyed the miner's direction. There was the sound of firing, but he remained behind the hut until his friends reappeared.

"Hurrah for Garry Kean!" cried honest English John, "our young lady is saved, and the credit is all his."

But Brackett stepped forward, trembling violently.

"My daughter!" he gasped; "is she injured?"

"Not a particle, I am sure!" Kean cheerfully replied. "She is in a swoon, but I do not think she has suffered any injury."

The Iron Judge grasped the speaker's hand.

"My heart is too full for words," he said, brokenly. "For now I will only remark that a father's thanks are yours, but I shall have more to say presently."

Another day had dawned, and there was peace

at Jack's Delight, but the women were still shuddering as they remembered the scenes of the night. There had been fighting, and hard fighting, at that, but the defenders had rallied and, under the mayor's lead, had charged upon the Reds, routed them utterly, and driven those who survived the assault outside the city limits.

Among the fallen had been Nathan Bradley, although he lived until morning. Thad Johnson had been slain in the fight near Pfaff's saloon, in a hand-to-hand fight with English John. Colonel Yoke Norman, too, was found dead after the charge upon the Reds. There was positive proof that he had died fighting with Nicholson's men, and there was room to believe that Mrs. Brackett's rebuke had aroused the dormant manhood within him.

Judge Brackett sat alone in his parlor. Alice was in her room, attended by Electa, and was doing as well as could be expected. Elmer Nicholson, after getting rid of the guard at the conservatory door, had, with the aid of his paid ruffians, forcibly abducted both Alice and Electa, and, in the medley of noise and confusion, their struggles had been unheard. Once outside the building Elmer had separated the girl from her old friend, and endeavored to carry her to the "trackless wilderness," but had been checked in time. He was a prisoner, and, as before said, Alice was doing very well, despite some natural nervousness.

Brackett's chief worry was for his wife. That lady, with whom there remained no desire for political honors, and to whom Caesar was no longer a shining example, had knelt in that same parlor that morning, and, at her husband's feet, confessed her fault and implored his pardon. There was no unworthy corner in the judge's heart, and he had gravely, kindly forgiven her. But the end was not yet. Agatha Brackett was in bed, and Dr. Crandall had said that she was threatened with fever—hence, Brackett's solicitude.

Other news had Crandall given that morning. A report had been received from Boise City, and it was to the effect that Alice had been the victim, not of arsenic, but of a simple and harmless drug. What this was had been made clear by Nathan Bradley's dying confession. Learning that Alice was to be taken away from the city, he had hired French Marie to give her a drug which would make her ill for a few days.

All this, and other things, Brackett had in mind when he was interrupted by callers. He looked up as they entered, and easily recognized one, for he was Garry Kean, but the other appeared to be an entire stranger.

It was the old gentleman in the gold-bowed spectacles seen at the City Hall.

Garry introduced him as "Mr. Brown," and then added:

"You sent for me, judge, I believe."

"I did."

Brackett glanced at the old gentleman as he spoke, but Kean smiled and responded:

"Do not hesitate to speak out, sir. This gentleman is one of my oldest acquaintances."

"In a word, then, I wish to beg your pardon for the way I have treated you. Beset by troubles of my own, I have been guided by my prejudices, and, without good reason, have thought and said ill of you. It does not look well in me to be brought to reason by the services you have done me, instead of by my sense of fair play, but I cannot claim that honor. If, however, you will overlook the past, we will start anew."

"By all means, sir," Kean frankly replied. "Your motives have been of the best, and if I have any cause for complaint, I freely excuse your acts in the case."

"If the lad needs recommendation, I can give it," added the unknown "Mr. Brown."

"Mr. Lawrence is all right, I think, but you—haven't I seen you before?" Brackett asked, looking sharply at Brown.

"It is possible that you have."

"You look like an old friend of mine, whom I have not seen for twenty long years."

"What was his name?"

"Edmund Robertson."

"I am not surprised to hear that I look like him, for—I am Edmund Robertson!"

The judge started quickly forward, and while Garry stood by smiling, the elder men shook hands as only old friends, reunited, can. The old gentleman was the first to speak practically:

"You now know me as I am, Brackett, but there is another surprise in store for you. Let me introduce this young man, known as Garry Kean and Hubert Lawrence. He is, in point of fact, my son, Adrian Robertson!"

Brackett's face flushed.

"And was it your son whom I have persecuted—"

"Garry Kean" stopped him with a gesture.

"No more, sir; let the past be buried. You will understand now why I refused to give my real name when under arrest; I would not have the news go East to my father that I was branded a criminal."

"Thank fortune!" exclaimed the old gentleman, "my son's enemies have confessed that all the charges against him were false. Come, Brackett, don't look so down-hearted; my boy

is none the better because he is my boy; and we bear you no ill will. Judge, let us change the subject. I hear that, before Nathan Bradley died, he told a story about you."

"He told the story of Saint Ledair!" the judge gloomily replied.

"He tried to, and tried to blacken your name and Alice's, but he did not know the story. No one knew it but me. Look you, Brackett, when you, a student and a mere boy, met and married Alice's mother in the Virginia mountains, your father, the first Judge Brackett, did a cruel thing to separate you and your young wife, and, though it was no fault of yours, I believe that it killed your wife. I think your father was sincere when he cast doubt upon the legality of the marriage, but he was wrong—the marriage was legal, and I can prove it!"

"Thank Heaven!" Brackett uttered.

"Ten years ago the proof came to my hands, and as I had loved both you and your father, I tried to use it, but in vain. Your father was dead, and you were gone from the knowledge of all who once knew you. I tried to find you but failed. The day is now late, but I can prove all I assert."

Brackett silently shook the old gentleman's hand.

"Now," Robertson added, "I am in this town because my son here sent for me post-haste. I will tell you in a few words why he did so. You know that, in olden times, I was accounted a skillful surgeon. Well, for many years I have made a specialty of treating the eyes, and I venture to say that my skill is second to no man's. Adrian sent for me to see if I could help your Alice. Brackett, I have seen the girl only casually, but I believe that she can be cured!"

The Iron Judge vainly tried to speak. Then he gave a hand each to the Robertsons, father and son, made a fresh effort and replied:

"I have been unjust to 'Garry Kean,' but, now, it looks as though the greatest blessings of my life are to come through him!"

The story is told. The few surviving Reds, bereft of the services of Bradley and Johnson as leaders, left Jack's Delight never to return.

Elmer Nicholson was saved from punishment because he was his father's son. He expressed contrition, and a desire to be a missionary to Alaska, and he was promptly sent to that distant land. In the eight years which have since elapsed he has often been heard from as a faithful, worthy laborer among the Indians. Whether he has really reformed is not known to his old acquaintances, but they hope that he is sincere.

When, in the old days at Jack's Delight, he asserted that the judge had once had "a superfluity of wives," he spoke from an imperfect knowledge of the case. There was no foundation for the statement.

English John is still a miner, and above his hut floats the Star Spangled Banner, as of yore.

Mrs. Brackett passed through a long illness, and, when she recovered, she was a changed woman. The scales had fallen from her eyes, and she no longer mistook the shadow for the substance. In place of her towering ambition was an earnest desire to be such a wife as Abram Brackett deserved, and in the years which had gone since her severe lesson she has been kind, womanly and devoted. Forgiven through noble generosity while yet her offense was fresh in mind, she has repaid the judge for his confidence in her change of heart.

And Abram Brackett still presides over the court of the city. Still is he called the "Iron Judge," but it is rather for his firmness than for severity. All men honor and admire him.

Elijah Nicholson was re-elected mayor, and held the office for several years.

And Alice's sight was restored by the skill of the great doctor. The operation was a complete success, and life was once more to her as it was to others. The elder Robertson decided to abandon active work and remain in the West, and the two families were very intimate until the day when their friendship was cemented by the marriage of "Garry Kean" and Alice. And no one rejoiced more on that occasion than Judge Abram Brackett.

Adrian Robertson is known in the West as a brilliant lawyer and politician, and, in the latter line of business, he has shown his father-in-law that it is possible for a man to be a politician and yet be an honorable man. It is believed that "Garry Kean" will yet be sent to Congress by his admirers.

Marie and the gorgeous coachman in buttons were dismissed, but Electa remains in the family as Alice's attendant. The good lady retains her affection for the old-time heroines, but has had no chance to show her heroism since Jack's Delight became a law-abiding place.

It was at one time thought that Electa and English John would venture into the marriage state, but the latter finally decided that the old flag which floated over his residence was as good a companion as he desired, while Electa concluded that her mission in life was to take care of the young Robertsons.

THE END.

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